

TALES OF THE RANCH OPERATION ERIS

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Thank you for taking the time to read it. Enjoy

PROLOGUE

CHAPTER 1 – AS THE WORLD TURNS

CHAPTER 2 – SUDDEN INTERRUPTION

CHAPTER 3 – SHOES TO FILL

CHAPTER 4 – TO THOSE GONE BEFORE

CHAPTER 5 – MEMORIES

CHAPTER 6 – MISSION PREP

CHAPTER 7 - INSERTION

CHAPTER 8 – IN PLACE

CHAPTER 9 – AND SO IT BEGINS

CHAPTER 10 – TIME STANDS STILL

CHAPTER 11 – GAME PLANS

CHAPTER 12 – INDICATORS

CHAPTER 13 - ADVANCES

CHAPTER 14 – MORALE

CHAPTER 15 – POSITIONING

CHAPTER 16 – UNINVITED GUESTS

CHAPTER 17 – JOURNEY

CHAPTER 18 – THE LONG MARCH

CHAPTER 19 – RIGHT WHERE WE WANT THEM

CHAPTER 20 – END RUN

CHAPTER 21 – NO ONE BEHIND

CHAPTER 22 – TO THE END

EPILOGUE – BRAVERY NEVER GOES OUT OF FASHION

PROLOGUE

Bravery is the capacity to perform properly even when scared half to death. General Omar N. Bradley

Date/Time: 12 March/0209

Location: Somewhere over Belgium

There is nothing worse in this life than jumping out of a perfectly good airplane thought Major Thomas Dayfield as the C-130J took another bounce from the turbulence on its low level flight into the drop area. *However, in this case, it gets us out of this turbulence and I'm all for THAT. We should be climbing soon.*

He glanced at the men and women around him, sixteen in all, taking the ride about as easily as he was. The pilots, members of the AFNAS 132nd Airlift Squadron (Special), seemed to be going out of their way to find every bump in the area on their way in. They had called in “feet dry” over land and had descended to the low level penetration route on their way to the drop zone. He looked over at Technical Sergeant (E-6) Amber Taylor-Bates, who looked greener than she should have in the dim lighting of the interior of the droning C-130, even with the camouflage face paint on. She attempted a half a smile at him, but was having trouble keeping her stomach from emptying the contents onto the deck of the plane. The loadmaster had handed out the small paper envelopes containing the plastic bags for air sickness prior to take off, but the problem lie in trying to get it out of the envelope quickly enough to be used.

She apparently couldn't handle it anymore and vomited on the deck and an immediate stench filled the cargo area. The loadmaster, an older man who had volunteered to serve even though he was past the age of retirement, glared at her since he knew it would be his responsibility to clean when they returned to base.

The smell hit Thomas like a ton of bricks and he felt even more queasy. He stepped up and went back through the cargo area and made contact with the loadmaster. “How long until we start climbing?” he yelled over the engines.

The loadmaster took a bite of the ham sandwich he had in his left hand and spoke into the microphone of his helmet. After receiving a reply he yelled back “In a few minutes we are heading up and getting out of this. You probably need to get started on your last minute checks. Oh yeah, and thank your Sergeant for the little gift she left for me, Major.”

“Let's hope it doesn't turn into the gift that keeps giving, Chief. Else you are in for a huge job when you get back to England” said Thomas as he turned and looked back over his team on the current mission.

Seated next to Amber were the other two members of his fire team, Senior Master Sergeant (E-8) Brian Holmes and Chief Master Sergeant (E-9) Greg Henry. To their left was Bravo Fire Team, led by Captain Michael Parsons and partnered with Sergeant (E-5) Nancy Dugger. Thomas had almost pulled Nancy from the mission due to her recent loss, but grudgingly kept her on the team at Michael's request. Next to them, and trying to keep down their pre-mission breakfast, were Sergeant Nate Clark and Staff Sergeant (E-5) William (Call me Willy) Perez, two former members of the farm in Nebraska that transferred in to the Dayfield Ranch.

Thomas looked at the right side of the aircraft at recently promoted Major Darren Thompson and his ever-present partner Chief Master Sergeant (E-9) Frank Zimmer. Rounding out Darren's Charlie Team were Staff Sergeant (E-6) Jeremy Baines and Sergeant Martin Watkins. The final team, Delta, was led by also recently promoted First Lieutenant Rick Jones. Originally enlisted in the Texan Militia, he had received a battlefield commission at the Battle of Myrtle Beach after transferring to the North American Union Freedom Guards and received his current billet three days prior to the mission. He led Master Sergeant (E-8) Scott Carlson, Staff Sergeant (E-5) Heather Davis and her brother Staff Sergeant (E-5) Rob Davis.

All but Watkins were like brother and sisters since he was late in coming to the unit. Although fairly "new" by the unit standards as they had pretty much been together since the Fall, he had been with them for quite some time and had proved his mettle after some initial setbacks.

It seemed like there was quite a bit of higher rank on the teams selected, but this was normal for the Operations Group (OpGrp) Alpha of the 14th Special Operations Battalion in the North American Union Freedom Guards. With as many daring and successful missions behind enemy lines as the team had performed, the North American Union had no other choice but to promote the members of the team. While most armies might have moved them on to new assignments or jobs, the new national defense force took a practical approach. They left the unit alone and let them continue to perform above expectations each time. The entire unit had been transferred from the Texan Armed Forces before the invasion of Europe had begun and had continued to perform miracles behind the lines.

Thomas was almost thrown off balance when the aircraft bounced again and went back to his seat and checked on Amber. She looked him in the eyes and mouthed "I'm sorry" for the mess she had made. He had cautioned her while eating not to fill up too much that evening before their flight, but, in typical Amber fashion, had not really paid attention. While she could remember the smallest details while out on a mission, it seemed back at base, she completely lost her head. He was glad she could focus on the mission and be forgetful of the little things when it didn't matter. Other members of the two squads were looking a little green around the gills and probably would be following the example of Amber fairly soon if they didn't exit the plane.

Thomas started preparing his equipment for that expected time and was followed by the other fifteen members in the aircraft. The loadmaster took a look over the pallet containing the necessary equipment for the team and ensured the parachute rig was set to deploy as they pushed it out. Weapons were checked and rechecked and vital equipment was strapped down to the individual packs of the teams or on their body.

The loadmaster came back and yelled at the waiting team. “WE’RE GETTING READY TO CLIMB! IT’S GONNA BE PRETTY FAST!” Fast was an understatement. The aircraft seemed to be sitting on its tail and climbing. Thomas knew the Hercules was like a four engine fighter, but this was just about as fast as he ever remembered making a climb. The plane finally leveled out at 6,000 feet above ground level and continued their dangerous mission towards the drop zone. Hopefully the IU fighters from Spangdahlem, Hahn, Bitburg, Buchel and Geilenkirchen had been drawn off by the staged raids happening far to their east. The C-130 made a huge target for some lucky IU pilot to brag about if they were detected. The real threat was from Surface to Air Missiles and Anti-Aircraft Artillery, but a Wild Weasel raid by Texan F-15Gs and Alliance EF-18Gs should have shut them down prior to their arrival. Still it only took one lucky guy with one lucky round to take down the plane. A red light blinked three times and came on steadily in the rear of the plane, meaning *Be prepared to drop*. The loadmaster signaled to the waiting team to don their goggles and helmets and prepare for the drop. The team did so and did last minute checks to ensure nobody left anything behind. After two minutes, they heard an alarm in the rear of the aircraft and saw the ramp starting to descend. Each person finished buddy checks on each other and pronounced each other fit to jump.

The loadmaster got the cargo ready to roll out first since they wanted to leave after it did. It wouldn’t do to hit the ground and then be smashed by several hundred pounds of cargo coming down on top of you. They assisted the loadmaster in pushing the container back to the rear of the plane and felt the aircraft slow and the nose slightly rise to assist the cargo leaving the plane.

The light changed from red to green and an alarm sounded. The parachute was deployed and nature took over as the drag of the open chute pulled it the rest of the way out. It was quickly followed by sixteen jumpers racing off the ramp in pairs into the night sky.

As he was the commander and leader of the team, Thomas and Amber were the first out of the plane. The cold air hit him like a brick wall as he fell for three seconds before pulling the cord on his T-12 parachute which activated his pilot chute. The sudden jerk of the lines and the sudden deceleration of his body meant his parachute had opened correctly; however, he looked up to check out of habit. Finding everything in order he checked to his left and found Amber doing much the same as he was. He looked below him at the cargo floating gently and pulled on the left and right risers to follow it down to the earth. They were planning on landing in a somewhat secluded area near the German town of Preist, which would put them fairly close to the target’s locations, but far enough away to not be suspicious.

The C-130 continued its pathway into the former country of Germany delivering more supplies to the underground resistance movement. Daily flights over the occupied territory dropped supplies to the brave fighters continuing their guerrilla warfare against the IU invaders and more groups were coming online each and every day now the FNC was closer to liberating them.

As he continued to drop, Thomas thought about the initial briefing he had received on the mission...

CHAPTER 1 – AS THE WORLD TURNS

The world was a different place than they all remembered it. The IU had been defeated on North American soil by the combined might of the United States, Alliance of Free North American States (AFNAS), Texas, the North East States Alliance (NESA), Pacifica, the North American Union (NAU) and Mexico. Other countries gave help along the way, but it was the complete determination of the American peoples that overcame the invasion force. Industry behind the invasion areas had sprung up and brought the people out of the crisis following the Fall. There was still banditry and brigands on the North American continent, but for the most part, it was safe.

The industries focused on the war making potential of the American people, much like it had ramped up after Pearl Harbor during World War II. Thousands of industries produced the materials needed for a complete and utter defeat of the Islamic Union and it helped focus the people towards a common goal. After the Summit of North American Leaders, a conference in which all the leaders of the current American nations had come together to discuss the threat of the IU in the world, each nation had made an individual declaration to defeat the IU any way possible. It seemed like the more things changed, the more they stayed the same as history repeated itself with an eerily similar version of the Allied Powers in World War II vowing the same destruction on Germany.

In a curious position, the industries no longer were capable of the timely process of high tech equipment that took months to produce. Instead, they focused more along the mass produced items that could be brought to the fight quickly. War time footing brought a whole new meaning to the industrial might of North America and ships, aircraft, tanks, equipment and weapons rolled off the assembly line at lightning speed. New technologies did emerge and were implemented, but for the most part, the war was being fought without the stealth aircraft, high tech ships and advanced technology as seen in the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Instead of doing more with less and relying on technology to give them the edge, the military knew the need for large formations of soldiers, fleets of ships and clouds of aircraft to get the job done. It was completely necessary since the Islamic Union outnumbered them greatly and had the sheer determination to win the battle even if it cost them greatly. While some high technology pieces made their way into the military, for the most part, the war was being fought using time proven designs.

The problem that wasn't easily solved was the export of American industry prior to the Fall. Many companies had moved their industrial bases to other nations like China, Korea and Taiwan, making it difficult to reproduce vital parts of systems quickly. The mass migration of American industry over the past twenty years had finally come back to haunt the nations. However, they quickly realized the error of their ways and began to ramp the industrial base back up to support the necessary items critical to the war effort.

Aircraft based on older, proven designs, like the F-16C and newer G (single seat fighter-bomber), H (two seat fighter-bomber) and I (improved thrust vectoring single seat fighter) models, A-10C models, F/A-18E, F, G and H (two seat dedicated fleet interceptor) models, and

F-15E, G (single seat fighter-bomber), H (Two Seat Wild Weasel and strike version with stealth enhancements) and I (single seat fighter-bomber with ACTIVE Technology) models were being produced at an advanced rate. The F-22 and F-35 production lines were destroyed during the Fall due to civil unrest and selected terrorist activity and was only now resuming. However, for the time to produce one F-22, three F-15I's could be built. Again, quality and quantity were the watchwords in producing military gear. AC-130 gunships were still in high demand and several squadrons now existed, used with great success as close air support on the battlefield and in counter interdiction. Some assembly lines had to be reopened, such as the F-15 and some started from scratch, such as the A-10 and the A-2A. The A-2A Skyraider II, a newer turboprop version of the old piston engine powered A-1 Skyraider, was being produced since it could perform close air support and counter-insurgency warfare far better than its high tech brothers. Updates to technology were implemented, but the basic design of the airframe was relatively unchanged since they were easier to produce and combat proven. As such, it didn't have the amount of bells and whistles normal to most modern day aircraft. It was simple, cheap and rugged. Their record in the North American defense showed them to be far superior to most modern designs and the production was increased. McDonald-Douglas took the lead on this project and implemented mass production of the aircraft as quickly as possible. Even Northrop got back into the fighter game, reintroducing its infamous F-20 Tigershark in the form of the F-20C and D as a low cost alternative to the exiled Air Forces of the world and to those in Latin America as well as some of the North American countries grudgingly buying a few squadrons. Much like the F-5 Tiger had been, it served the less sophisticated air forces very well. Although it had been a complete flop commercially when first introduced, more due to politics than actual design, it was now considered an equal to the venerable F-16 system. The premier fighter wing in the NESA used F-20s to great success, maintaining a high kill ratio in air to air combat and unparalleled close air support.

Naval Air Forces still centered around the F/A-18 models on the carriers and the S-3 Viking aircraft were brought back into service. Additionally, the F/A-18H was a dedicated missile carrier, much like the F-14 Tomcat had been from carriers in the past. Armed with the new AIM-125A missiles, the aircraft were dedicated long range interceptors. The missiles were based on the older design of the AIM-54 Phoenix, but had a range in excess of one hundred thirty miles now. Radar sets on the Hornets had been improved and the land based air forces were now taking notice of this missile and its capabilities. Plans were in the making to modify the F-15G models to carry this missile. Additionally, Marine forces still utilized Navy type aircraft for the most part with the exception of the AV-8D Harrier III aircraft. Again, the production lines had to be reopened, but these aircraft were well liked by their pilots and even more so by the troops they supported on the ground.

Reliable cargo aircraft like the C-130 and C-17 models were being produced for transport of critical supplies as well as airborne forces. CV-22 production was restarted after a long standstill since the production works had been destroyed during the Fall. These aircraft were now being produced in great numbers and were becoming some of the most relied on cargo aircraft on the battlefield. Tanker aircraft in the form of the Boeing 767 and converted DC-10 mothballed aircraft kept the fleets of aircraft in the air as well as their cargo carrying capacities bringing materials to the fight. Several converted 747 cargo/tanker aircraft had been sold to the North American nations and Boeing was now gearing up for full scale production of these immensely

popular cargo aircraft. The B-2A bomber production was restarted, but the surprise was the old B-52. The venerable workhorse was such a time proven and useful design it was brought back into production, although with new engines and a host of electronic goodies. The Boeing plant in Washington State started producing the design again in the B-52I model as well as bringing the B-1 back into production in the B-1C model. Older B-52H models that survived the Fall still soldiered on, still keeping a high ready rate in relation to its newer brothers. The triad of bombers served the North American forces well during the conflict, ranging deep into occupied territory and striking major targets. Numerous bomber wings were also allocated to the nuclear deterrence role, either on airborne alert or five minute alert on the ground, ready to strike at the IU. Newer aircraft designs were being introduced and tested, but it was the time proven designs that were winning the war. And like World War II, these aircraft were also given to friendly air forces and those in exile around the world.

Shipyards produced a modified version of the *Liberty* Class cargo ships produced in World War II, appropriately named the *Liberation* Class, although with increased cargo tonnage and better speed. Older 688(I) *Los Angeles* Class attack submarines were brought into service and the *Virginia* Class attack subs were brought into full scale production. *Ohio* Class missile submarines were still in service; silently waiting under the seas for nuclear strikes if they were called on to do so. The *Ohio* Class also served as the foundation for the design of the new build *Lewis* Class vessels, with a dual purpose of guided missile carriers or Special Operations support. The *USS Meriwether Lewis* was the lead vessel in this class and had, to date, sunk more IU shipping than any other submarine. Originally an *Ohio* Class design, it had been built as a guided missile sub and put back to sea early on in the conflict where it had ranged deep into the Atlantic striking at shipping as far out as the Strait of Gibraltar. With the generous sized missile compartment originally designed to carry nuclear tipped submarine launched ballistic missiles, the boat could hold an amazing amount of conventional Harpoon and Tomahawk missiles for anti-shipping and a good amount of Mark 48 ADCAP torpedoes for more conventional anti-submarine work. Being as quiet as they were, the subs were often called “Devil’s silence” by the Islamic Union mariners unlucky enough to encounter one and survive. Additionally, conventional diesel powered coastal patrol boats in the *Navajo* Class were put into production and assisted in protecting the North American continent along with having a shallow enough draft to support naval special operations. The Pacifica Ship, *PSS Shoshone* in this class had a distinguished battle record by sinking the IU heavy cruiser *Battle of Hattin* after finding it patrolling off the coast of Florida with its small battle group. The *Shoshone* managed to sink the cruiser along with another corvette before sneaking away, undetected by the IU forces.

Coastal patrol was also undertaken by *Cyclone* Class vessels and newer *Ithaca* Class cutters. These Coast Guard vessels maintained an ever present watch on the shores of North America and had held their own in several engagements with IU raiders along the coast. Even smaller patrol boats were common as well as riverine craft not originally designed to operate in the salt water oceans. However, these craft did well and kept Americans safe as they slept at night.

The utility of smaller escort type aircraft carriers was realized and were being produced again. Instead of taking several years to produce a single aircraft carrier, they now tailor designed a smaller carrier which could carry a single squadron for mission specific parameters, such as ASW, attack or fighter escort. These *Congressional* Class vessels were simple, cheap and

effective, giving exceptional results for their size. The Alliance ship, *NASS Jimmy Quillen*, was the lead in the class and had won several battle citations during the battle for North America, the invasion of Iceland and the invasion of the UK. It was heavily damaged during the Battle of the North Sea, but managed to limp back to the Norfolk shipyards where it was repaired and back in action. Full size *Ford* Class carriers were still being produced, but at a far slower rate than the smaller vessels. The *Ticonderoga* Class cruisers were still the mainstay of the fleet anti-air arm, but also included a goodly number of anti-ship missiles and new battle management designs. Designs such as the *Perry* Class frigates and *Burke* Class destroyers were produced along with new build *Hero* Class BB dreadnaughts. An upgrade on the *Iowa* class battlewagons, these ships were produced from the keel up as support ships for invasions with proven sixteen inch guns, five and eight inch secondary batteries, missiles and unguided rocket batteries for support of landing troops. The lead in this class, the Texan *TSS Sam Houston*, had distinguished itself in the Battle of the Gulf of Mexico, landing operations in Iceland and the UK before it was sunk by IU warplanes during the Battle of the North Sea. Its sister ship, the *TSS Davy Crockett*, avenged the sinking by charging within gun range of the IU aircraft carrier, *Alexandria*, and sinking her single handedly. The *Crockett* was badly mauled during the battle, but managed to escape by sinking a cruiser, a destroyer and two missile boats before escaping.

The Armies and Marines of the North American countries still had advanced armor in the form of M1A4 Abrams tanks, M113A8s, LAV-25s and M2A5 Bradleys, as these designs were already in place to be produced. Curiously enough, the Stryker Combat Vehicles were not being produced in great numbers. Some formations existed, but the basic design did not lend itself to the major combat operations the Armies were facing as well as its tracked counterparts. But even so, the Army now centered on the Infantry and support for it. While a tank battalion could immolate anything within its path, it still took the individual foot soldier to hold the ground taken. Helicopter designs were also on the tried and true, with AH-64D, E and F designs, UH and SH-60 A through I models, AH-1X Cobra, the MD500 or AH/MH-1 Little Birds, HH-65s, CH-47s and even older CH-53 classes making a comeback. Again, the armies relied on proven designs and implemented changes to technology as they could in the basic weapons systems.

The most major transformation was in small arms development. The firearms industries of North America had teamed up to produce the weapons needed for the fight. Like World War II, the M-16A5 and A6 rifle and M-4A4 carbine were produced by a number of companies. The major difference in the design was the new gas piston driven system instead of the old gas impingement system. The designs were easily modified and produced in great numbers for the troops. Another caliber was added for the troops in the field, the 6.5 Grendel. Its long range properties were exceptional for the designated marksman positions inside of individual fire teams and it was also based on a gas piston system as well. Two companies produced a designated marksman rifle capable of rugged operations as well as pinpoint fire on the battlefield. Longer range firepower was also to be had in the form of Springfield M1A systems and 7.62x51mm systems based on an AR-10 gas piston precision rifle design. The AR-10 system was also produced in a mid length carbine form for special operations personnel and those that needed a shorter length full caliber weapon.

Additionally, precision warfare took on a whole new meaning as plenty of precision rifles made their way into the hands of the various nations, ranging from 5.56mm weapons up to the vaunted

.50 BMG. While the factory had been destroyed in the fighting that raged on the North American continent, Barrett Firearms had reopened further west away from the fighting and was producing their large rifles almost nonstop. Additionally, they had branched out into other areas producing the M109, copies of the M-4, M-16 and the H & K designs smuggled out of Germany.

The M-249 now had a companion in the light machine gun role. The Ultimex-100 design and tooling had been purchased by the nation of Pacifica for hard currency and medical supplies and transported to Oregon where it was being produced. The machine gun was actually preferred by the majority of troops that used it and production was expanded for the Texan forces and those of the AFNAS. The M-240 machine gun was produced until the factory was destroyed by the IU forces during the initial invasion. A copy was being produced in New Mexico along with new production of the H&K 21 machine gun (the production lines having been smuggled out of Germany with the help of the AFNAS Navy) was being produced in Oklahoma for use by Texan forces. M2 HB production was restarted as no new designs could prove to be better than John Browning's masterpiece design.

Pistol designs ranged from whatever the troops could bring to newly produced issue arms from a variety of sources. The Beretta and Glock factories had been destroyed early on in the invasion and other companies had taken up the slack. Brazil quietly restarted and increased production of their Taurus firearms, sending them to the North American countries. Springfield opened production lines of the XD series as well as mass producing 1911 models. Other manufacturers followed the lead of Springfield and produced authorized copies of the XD series or 1911 models. Eventually, the military standardized the XD and Taurus OSS models as the standard, although they turned a blind eye to the 1911 models and other pistols as long as they were in the proper calibers. Acceptable calibers included the 9mm, .40 S&W and the .45 ACP.

Shotguns were limited to the effective Remington Model 870 and Mossberg M590 series. Their time proven and almost flawless operations made them uniquely suited to security applications, urban combat and even some frontline troops. Supposedly "obsolete" in the face of main battle rifles and assault weapons, shotguns still filled a niche in a weapons complement as they had in every military operation since the American Revolution. The surprise came from the Heckler and Koch MP7 Personal Defense Weapon. It, along with the production lines of the unique ammunition, the HK416 and 417, the G36, the USP pistol and the H&K 21, were broken down and sent to America during the invasion of Europe by the Islamic Union. In a deal worked out by the AFNAS, the company president and his staff were granted safe passage and a new life in the AFNAS in exchange for the items. The cargo had been loaded onto an AFNAS cargo ship and brought back to the port of Charleston. However, the USP line had been intercepted and destroyed during land transport to the coast by IU attack aircraft. The MP7 had supplemented the M4 as a Personal Defense Weapon, mainly used by aircrews, armor crews, machine gunners as a secondary weapon if needed and some Personal Security Officers. The G36 line never went into full scale production, mainly because the factories of North America were already suited to producing the AR15 variants. The 416 platform was produced alongside of its American brothers and was highly regarded in whoever's hands it ended up in.

New ammunition factories sprung up in several states or were reopened after the Fall, adding to the production of the Lake City plant in Missouri. Round designs were varied from the M855

full metal jacket design to the Mk 262 design in 5.56mm. 7.62x51mm production was also wide ranged and varied, from standard M80 ball to M118LR to M995 Armor Piercing to specialized rounds like the Hornady TAP and M948 SLAP rounds. Pistol rounds were almost entirely hollowpoint as the nations of North America, with the exception of the United States, had not signed the Hague Convention. The designs were generally based on the Speer Gold Dot Hollow Point design, but also included a collection of Remington Golden Saber, CorBon DPX, Winchester SXT, Hydra Shok and standard ball ammunition on occasion. As the Texan Government once said to the Militia Forces “Whatever fits in your guns will work for us.”

Winning against the invasion of North America was not easy, but it was done. As foreseen by the IU Chief of Staff prior to the invasion, the American fighting men and women made all the difference in the world. The invasion was stopped before it could take a serious hold on the country and beaten back to the beaches. IU military forces attempting to escape found themselves surrounded by the combined naval forces of the North American countries and many cargo ships carrying personnel, materials and equipment were sunk. Now that North America was secure, the preparations were in place to defend the continent against any further aggression. IU long range bombers were sent occasionally to bomb factories and other targets, but the air defenses of the Continental Air Defense of North America made this a costly endeavor. The American nations knew it would only be a matter of time before the IU tried again, so they focused on fortifying North America and preparing for another invasion.

Following the defeat on North American soil and the loss of Iceland, the IU had rethought their position in Europe and started to dig in. Much like Hitler’s vaunted Atlantic Wall, the IU had prepared the beaches of the European continent for a full scale defense, making it hard to invade at any point. They would concentrate on the European continent first and then move to the UK and Ireland, where underground resistance was still fighting a good fight and keeping the forces occupied. The main continent also had a good resistance as well as the nation of Switzerland. The Swiss had held out against the IU and had annexed portions of Germany, Italy and Austria prior to the complete encirclement by the IU. Their nation was one under arms. All military and militias were called into service and the IU teams that attempted to operate in that country were detected and dealt with swiftly and without remorse. Swiss representatives to the North American countries promised that country’s pledge to the liberation of Europe as well as seeing the war through to the end against the IU. Russian delegations told the same story as the democratic forces within that country were close to gaining a victory and intelligence teams from the IU were found operating in that nation. Neither country would start hostilities until the main continent was invaded and the beachheads secured. The Swiss also needed a secure lifeline and would not guarantee that nation’s participation until they were in a position to be resupplied by the allied armies.

Various other members of the former European nations had begged the North American countries to come to Europe to liberate them and the American people had taken the call. People who had escaped from the European continent and settled in America quickly petitioned the governments at the Summit to invade Europe and free the people there. Their words were heeded and the military might of the North American peoples was brought to bear, again for the third time in less than one hundred years. The Italian, French, Polish and Czech delegations were the most outspoken, likening the occupations in their countries to those of Nazi Germany,

although politely noting the current German delegation was nothing like their ancestors had been. German and Austrian delegations spoke of the same genocide that occurred during the last World War. Each nation was guaranteed the combined forces of the Alliance would be brought to bear in an attempt to liberate the world from the clutches of the IU. A coalition, named the Free Nation Coalition, was formed during a summit of free world leaders in Oklahoma City and combined their planning and operations staffs, much like the British and Americans had done during WWII.

The liberation of Europe was started with the invasion of Iceland, a critical point in any Atlantic campaign. While the population of Iceland was tiny in comparison to the rest of Europe and had not been able to mount any serious resistance since the nation forbade firearms to its citizens, it was happy to have the FNC liberate it. The IU had stationed ten thousand soldiers on the island and several battalion sized battles erupted all over the island. The large battles of Olafsvik and the Battle of Keflavik were major set piece battles in which the coordination between the allied countries was first tried in battle. At the end of the campaign, the Battle of Gullfoss was where the IU forces were eventually defeated and surrendered. The invasion was greeted warmly by the Icelandic people, but the main reason was to test the international cooperation and command aspects of heading a large scale military operation outside of North America. The island also served as a useful base in order to continue on to the British Isles, the next stop in the invasion plan.

The invasion of Ireland and Great Britain had taken quite a long time to achieve, but after a foothold was gained, the rest of the islands soon fell as the IU fell back onto the continent and prepared for the impending invasion. More industries were built in both the UK and Ireland which added to the weight of materials coming in a steady stream from North America and Mexico. Although new factories stood up, they were under constant bombardment by IU warplanes, missile and rocket attacks much like World War II. The only guaranteed source of arms and equipment, again, was North America. After declaring the islands secure, Ireland and the UK became an armed encampment again, with millions of troops deploying from the US, the new North American Union, Texas, AFNAS, Mexico, Cuba, Brazil, Argentina and the Combined Armies of the Central American States. The other nations of South America also gave forces under the Unified South American Nations, or USAN as they were called.

Venezuela had originally opposed the war, the crackpot leader there citing the former US had finally paid its dues to the world. It reached a head when it continued its support of the FARC rebels in Columbia and those two nations went to war, provoked by Venezuela. Venezuelan armed forces “invaded” Columbia due to claimed cross border incursions by Columbian police and army units. While they met with initial success, the Columbian Armed Forces halted the attacks and delivered a deadly counterblow to the invasion forces. They advanced deep into Venezuelan territory before a revolt by the senior members of the Armed Forces deposed the sitting President and made peace with their neighbor. Afterwards, the country took on a new course and fully supported the defense of North America and the invasion of Europe.

CHAPTER 2 – SUDDEN INTERRUPTION

Date/Time: 4 March/1114 Local

Location: RAF Bassingbourn, Cambridgeshire County, Great Britain

“And we need that communications center out of action, Major. Can your team do it?” asked the Colonel in charge of the Joint Special Operation Planning cell. He was a member of the NESA Army, but had been assigned to the Joint Special Operation Division (J-SOD) which combined the special purpose forces of all the nations under one command. While each nation would provide its own local command, the ultimate decisions for their missions came from this cell. It provided the FNC with a unified command so missions were not duplicated in any way.

“Why not the Air Force? Can they not bomb it?” asked Major Thomas Dayfield as he poured a cup of coffee from the metal pot sitting on the woodstove. The heating had gone out again in the building they were in, forcing them to use the old fashioned pot belly stove for heat in the chilly English morning. They were used to using the stoves for heat as their barracks were unheated for the most part. An AFNAS Seabee detachment assigned at the base had a talented metal smith who used a local foundry to cast the stoves for the buildings from scrap metals.

“They can and have bombed the transmitter several times, but the location of the actual communications center is unknown. We believe it is underground and our contacts within the German underground haven’t been able to give us a firm location. They know where it is at, but as to the extent of the underground bunker complex, they don’t know and aren’t equipped to take it out,” said the Colonel.

“And you want my team to go dig them out?” asked Thomas.

“It’s part of the larger operation we have planned. Operation Eris is part of a series of operations lopping off the heads of the command centers all along the western front as a prelude to our conventional attack,” said the Colonel.

“Yeah, we can do it. Shouldn’t be a problem as it looks pretty straightforward. Do we have contacts on the ground or will we be alone for this one?” asked Thomas as he looked at his second in command, Major Darren Thompson.

“German resistance will be providing one of their best cells in the area for this one. They have managed to be sneaky enough to evade capture since the early days in the IU invasion. Some speak English, so translation shouldn’t be a problem, but you have a few German speakers don’t you?” asked the Colonel.

“Two are fluent and two more that can get along well enough to order a beer and ask for the bathroom,” said Darren, remembering Amber and Nate Clark spoke it fairly fluently. Mike Dugger and Rob Davis also understood enough to be able to translate for the most part.

“I hope their translation skills are better than average, they speak a peculiar dialect in the Eifel region,” laughed the Colonel.

“Why is it called the Eifel region when the thing was in France?” asked Darren, an irrelevant question.

“Apparently the designer was from Germany and from that region. Something like that. Any other pertinent questions?” asked the Colonel.

“Target folder?” asked Thomas.

The Colonel handed over two six part folders and an external hard drive, each with the traditional “Top Secret” markings on the outside. Thomas and Darren knew well enough the plans would never leave the room they were currently in, but it was large enough to house everyone in the team while planning was conducted.

“Exfil?” asked Darren as he and Thomas briefly perused the mission folders.

“Two CV-22 aircraft will provide airlift back to England from an area near Saint Vith. They are already coordinating a refueling stop along the way with the Belgian resistance,” said the Colonel.

“Saint Vith is a pretty long way from where we are going, especially on foot,” observed Thomas.

“The German underground has promised transport to that location. Remember the big picture here. The cross channel operations are due to go soon and knocking out the communications is key to that operation. We’ve already knocked out most of the radars and other major installations near the coast, but this one particular center seems to be the key to the major defense of the Low Countries,” said the Colonel.

“Which, of course, makes it a critical target during any invasion attempt. Are we being pulled from our mission for Phoenix?” asked Thomas, referring to the planned cross channel invasion of mainland Europe.

“No, you are still a go for that one, although we think it might be postponed for a little longer,” said the Colonel.

“So why are we going to take it out now? If the invasion is postponed, they stand a chance of replacing it before the operation starts,” asked Thomas.

“According to intelligence, this facility is one they cannot replace easily. They can use some secondary systems, but for the most part, this is one of the main hubs in the Western Theater of Operations,” said the Colonel as he helped himself to a cup of the special blend Columbian coffee. An air defense unit of the Columbian Air Force was on base and had it shipped in regularly.

Thomas and Darren continued looking through the folders and didn't find any major glaring errors so far. Typically the J-SOD just gave them the missions. How they conducted it was entirely up to them. "Are you going to be on base much longer?" asked Thomas.

"I had planned on getting back to Mildenhall tonight, but if you need me to stick around until tomorrow to answer any other questions, I can," said the Colonel.

"If you don't mind. I'm going to get the usual suspects together to have a look at this after lunch. I can't think of anything else right now," said Thomas.

"Looks to be pretty straightforward. However, we could mark the target for a bombing raid," said Darren.

"We already thought of that, but again, we aren't sure how big the complex is. We need boots on the ground to eyeball it and take it out. How many are you planning on taking?" asked the Colonel.

"We haven't had the opportunity to look through the defensive plans yet, but probably two teams, sixteen total. Probably another sixteen on ready alert here if we run into something we can't handle," said Thomas. "Darren, you agree?"

"I think sixteen would be sufficient from just glancing at the overview. One thing about the IU, when they want to be low key and not advertise a location, they don't. Even if it sacrifices security in the long run," said Darren. "There may be more on the ground we don't see, but we won't know about that until we get there."

"Anything else I can get for you?" asked the Colonel.

"You have anyone squirreled away at headquarters from that area by chance?" asked Darren.

"Actually, we have a few Germans up there, but whether or not they are from that area is another matter entirely. Let me make a few phone calls and find out," said the Colonel as he departed.

"Must be pretty important to pull us off our mission training for Phoenix for this," said Thomas.

"Looks like it. But you know they have been looking for this particular commo site for a while now," said Darren as he continued to look over the pages.

"Want to grab the guys and do a working lunch?" asked Thomas.

"Yeah, grab some box nasties from the chow hall and come back here to give it a go," said Darren. "Want me to grab them or stay here and look after the mission plans?"

"I'll grab everyone. Your team, my team, Mike and Rick's teams sound about right?" asked Thomas.

“I think that would work out good. Two more squads from Bravo Company to back us up. That way we don’t pull everyone from the Phoenix training,” said Darren.

“Yeah, that sounds good. I’ll grab Justin Smith and his second...what’s his name again? Meyers or something like that?” asked Thomas.

“Yeah, Bill Meyers. Their teams would be fine as back up,” said Darren, continuing to look over the reports.

Thomas gathered up his carbine and left the building to find the others, grab lunch and head back over to begin mission planning. On the way to the barracks he saw Captain Bill Meyers walking towards him.

“Hey Bill,” said Thomas.

“Hey Tom, how’s it going?” asked Bill. Although it was not normal for a Captain to call a Major by their first name, the individuals in the 14th Special Operations Battalion did so out of the earshot of the normal brass. They felt comfortable doing so since they had been through a lot together and the ability to be comfortable with each other meant more than military courtesies. However, there was always a time and place for it and they did so in the presence of others. And since others might have been watching, Meyers snapped up a salute as he walked up.

“You know where Justin is? We have a job opportunity for you,” said Thomas, returning the salute.

“Yeah, he went to chow a few minutes ago. Want me to grab him and meet you at Jabba?” asked Bill, referring to the intelligence center as “Jabba.” Nobody really knew who started calling the intelligence building “Jabba” but the name stuck after the first few days. The teams had originally taken to calling it “the hut” and somewhere along the way it changed to the nickname of “Jabba.” Like many things in the military, it was just something that was.

“Yeah, just you two for the moment,” said Thomas. “Know where my hooligans are?”

“I think they are over at your barracks debating whether or not to attempt to cut the rubber they are passing off as the meatballs in the spaghetti today,” laughed Bill.

“Well, if you can stop Justin in time, grab a box meal and head on over. It’s a working lunch,” said Thomas.

“Okay, will do,” said Bill as he wandered off in the direction of the dining hall to fetch his team commander. Thomas departed to find the other two squads. The ranking within the teams was more unusual than most since they tended to be top heavy, but again, they were good at their jobs and the brass typically left them in place since they were a major propaganda tool as well as efficient.

Walking into the coed barracks, he found his team cleaning weapons, discussing something or other, writing letters home and cat napping. Nothing of major importance since they were not due to train until the next day. The barracks were coed not at the discretion of the team leader, but at the demands of the females since they felt more comfortable living with their team than in the female barracks. Nancy Dugger was in visiting with her father, Mike, away from her team for the moment.

“Hey guys and gals from First and Second Teams. We have a meeting over at Jabba. Grab a box lunch from the chow hall and meet over there in twenty minutes,” announced Thomas.

“The training schedule modified?” asked Jeremy Baines, pulling a Boresnake through the barrel of his M115 (Ultimax 100) Squad Automatic Weapon and starting to put it back together. The weapons had been outright traded from a unit from Pacifica for their M249s in a barter they both thought they were getting the better deal on.

“No, a new mission. One that you will like,” said Thomas as he kicked at the bed of Frank Zimmer who was napping at the moment. “Get up you lazy bum.”

“Five more minutes, sweetie, that’s all I ask,” groaned Frank as he popped open one eye to see who it was.

“Call me sweetie again and I’m telling Julie on you. Let’s go sniper, up and at them,” said Thomas, kicking at the foot of the bed again.

The team got up from what they were doing and gathered whatever weapons they were carrying at the moment and locked the others up. It was mandatory for everyone on the base to be armed since the IU still sent raiders deep into English territory and furthermore, some of the population was still sympathetic to the cause of the IU and had attacked it on several occasions. Besides the air raids and missile attacks, there was still a ground threat. However, the base defense forces typically defeated them at the perimeter. But nothing was left to chance as they gathered up a long gun, their pistol in a simple holster and appropriate ammunition for each of them. Jeremy replaced the machine gun in the weapons locker in the building and gathered up his Heckler and Koch MP7 PDW for the trip over.

They wandered over to the chow hall as a group and Thomas signed off on the form required for the team to get the box meals. As in most militaries, it didn’t take long for the nonessential paperwork to start popping up again. Performance Rating Evaluations had recently come back and Thomas had balked at the idea since he felt he didn’t need to justify his team’s performance to anyone. When pressed with the matter, he sent them back with only the rating marked and their name in the appropriate block. When they were sent back for corrections and justification of the markings, he simply added “Received too many awards to list here while performing missions with the 14th Special Operations Battalion, Alpha Company, Surveillance, Detection and Reconnaissance Team 1. If they need justification on how well they do their job, please join us on a mission and you will see for yourself.” When an individual from headquarters again pressed the matter, Thomas had him assigned to one of the teams during a three day escape and

evasion exercise. After the exercise, the Evaluations were quickly accepted and marked as “Received, no corrections needed, please file appropriately.”

Picking through the box meals and getting what type of sandwich they wanted, the teams made their way over to the intelligence hut as Darren was bringing more firewood inside from the pile outside. Someone had taken the time to break apart some wooden skids to add to the pile of various cuttings gathered from the local woods. Another convoy was due out to the Sherwood Forest for additional firewood since the base was running somewhat low.

“I got you roast beef. That’s what you like, right?” asked Thomas to Darren.

“Yeah, I don’t mind shoe leather on my sandwich,” laughed Darren. No matter how much the quality of life changed, the ability of a soldier to complain about the food never did. The group helped him out and quickly started another fire in the other stove since the hut was a bit chilly. They quickly found seating around the table and dug into their meals, trading off the various items with each other until they were content. Heather Davis had fired up the laptop computer and put the overhead projector on so the entire group could see the mission planning instead of relying on the paper to be passed around. The external hard drive was inserted into the computer and the files opened. A pop up came up afterwards warning the group the information on the device was classified and to ensure all personnel had proper security clearances before continuing.

“Overall mission is code named ‘Eris’ and is designed to destroy key command and control facilities in France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany prior to the invasion of the mainland. Our mission, code named ‘Eris Red Five’ is to take out a communications center near the former Air Base in Spangdahlem, Germany. Exact location of the bunker complex is unknown, but is within a ten to fifteen mile radius of the air base. Our job is to find the bunker, enter same, destroy all equipment, gather intelligence and ensure it cannot be reactivated without major repairs. Additionally, we plan on marking the location for a precision attack by air after we get done digging out the rats. We will be meeting up with German resistance fighters on the ground that will show us the entrance to the bunker and then it is up to us.”

“How we do it is up to us. What we are going to do has already been decided. But now, we need to plan it out to ensure our own survival so we can come back and put it back on the line for Operation Phoenix. Let’s see the overall map of the area,” said Thomas.

“Which one?” asked Heather as she munched on the chips from her meal.

“Start with standard satellite and move to satellite markup and then on to satellite topography overlay,” said Rick Jones.

She found the file she was looking for and brought it up on the screen. A standard 1 to 50,000 satellite generated photo map was brought up centered on the old NATO base and the group saw the area of operations. Some took closer looks and asked certain areas be enhanced prior to moving on.

“Satellite markup please,” said Mike Dugger.

She minimized the map they were looking at and brought up the intelligence generated map of the known locations and items of interest. Each item was marked with the date of discovery, what means were used to discover it or who discovered it along with a brief description of each. Attacks against facilities were marked with small or large red bursts depending on how many attacks had been performed. They finally found the suspected location of the communications site as well as the destroyed transmitters around the area.

“Bring up enhanced topo,” said Rob Davis.

Again, another picture appeared; this one much like the Google Earth program, only better. Topography could be enhanced down to the very foot and precise details could be seen, almost like a 3-D image. The intelligence facility didn’t have the Prism 3-D mission planning technology yet as it was reserved for the Headquarters facilities due to cost and the slow manufacture of the devices. However, the maps were updated as soon as they were requested by a skilled team of computer engineers in the AFNAS and it was almost as good. Again, they studied the maps, not saying a word, but forming their own ideas and plans for the mission. After studying the map for several minutes, Mike Dugger grabbed the laser designator off his rifle and pointed it at the screen.

“If I had to bet, I would say it’s right there,” he said, designating a hilltop on the map.

“Why there?” asked Greg Henry.

“Bring up the intelligence overlay again,” he said as the map was replaced. “Attacks here, here and here, well away from this location but within a short enough distance to where running cables and power lines wouldn’t be a big deal. And this hilltop is right in the center. Easy to defend and away from the towns nearby. The roadway seems to be traveled enough to keep the grass from growing and this looks like it could be the exhaust from an underground generator. See how the area is black here but in the other pictures it’s not? They could have covered the area after the generator run to mask the soot from the exhaust.”

“Plus, this hilltop is one of the highest in the area. Why wouldn’t you want your transmitter and receiver on the highest hilltop? And this building right here. Labeled as belonging to the old telephone company. I would bet they already have lines running in and out and they expended the facility. It was too minor a facility to target before in a strike. Bring up the intelligence reports from the resistance for say the past year concerning this site,” explained Mike.

Heather took a moment to dig through the items before she found what they were looking for. The collaborated report was brought up and the group looked it over. “Three times they identified this hilltop as being the probable location this past year, but each time our intelligence analysts ignored it since it isn’t easy to dig into that rocky hill side. Pennies to dollars it’s right there. They’ve had what, five, six years to dig in? We should send out a ping on this and see what they think,” said Justin Smith.

“And those folks on the ground probably have better local grapevine intelligence than we do. I concur on this as being the probable location,” said Darren, looking over the paper copy of the reports.

The doorbell rang to the facility and the intercom came on. “Colonel Rainey, all secure.”

The projector was put up as a blank screen and everyone covered whatever classified material they had in front of them as the Colonel was readmitted to the room and the door locked behind him. “I have some good news. We were able to find someone who can help. A Master Sergeant in the *Freie Bundeswehr* Brigade is from Wittlich, right close to where you guys are heading. He will be here tonight to assist,” said the Colonel.

“Does he *sprechen* English?” asked Amber.

“I don’t know, but it will be a good chance to brush up on your own German skills. You have any plans made out yet?” asked the Colonel.

“No, we were just about to start, but we think the location is here,” said Thomas as he had Mike explain the reasoning behind it.

“That sounds like the best intelligence summary about this whole thing I’ve heard yet. I’m stealing that man to run the intel shop at headquarters,” said the Colonel.

“Mike doesn’t play well with the rear area types. Remember Charleston?” laughed Nate Clark.

“Very true, us knuckle draggers belong on the front lines and not with the gnomes inside the dungeon,” laughed the Colonel. “You mind if I sit in on the mission planning?”

“Be my guest, but you might be in for a show,” warned Michael Parsons.

And a show it was as ideas were brought up, defended or tossed aside after major arguments. The standard five paragraph Operations Order was fairly simple to devise, Situation, Mission, Execution, Service and Support, Command and Signal were the five paragraphs they needed to cover. Situation was already fairly well covered; Mission was also somewhat easy as the mission had already been laid out for them minus a few things to be discussed later. However, everything changed dramatically upon the next paragraph.

The Colonel sat open mouthed as the plans for Execution were discussed and defended by the group. Arguments instantly broke out and it appeared there was general chaos and nothing was being accomplished. The conversations went from the extremes of “Wow, that’s an awesome idea, why didn’t I think of it?” to “That is probably the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard you say” to “hmm, that’s an interesting idea, let’s talk about it more” in the middle. He considered jumping in and stopping the bickering at some points, but found it hard to do so since, at times, there were five and six conversations going at once. During the course of the debates, someone would take note of an interesting idea to their right or left and jump from the current debate into that one.

But amid the chaos, the Colonel started to see a plan forming up. And a darn good plan at that. While certainly unorthodox, their planning methods seemed to work as eventually everyone agreed on the individual portions of the OPORD going up on the board. Even the back up team got involved in the spirited debates going on, even though they were not going on the actual mission. However, since they were going to be backing up the primary team they had a major stake in how the operation was going to be conducted. After the plan was fairly well laid out, the group revisited each item on the Execution portion before calling it good. And unlike some groups he had seen, no hard feelings were had afterwards.

Paragraphs four and five were fairly easy as they knew the Service and Support as well as the Command and Signal from previous missions, but it was added in because it was required. Thomas was unhappy about one item in the paragraph.

“What’s the possibility of getting us some air cover during the mission?” he asked the Colonel.

“On your infiltration it shouldn’t be a problem. Are you requesting close air support during your assault?” asked the Colonel.

“Probably not for the actual assault, but I would love to have it immediately available in case we needed it,” answered Thomas, speaking for the group.

“What kind are you looking at?” asked the Colonel.

“Oh, I would say two AC-130s, a flight of A-10s, another of A-2s, a flight of F-15Hs taking out the surrounding defenses and a high cap of F-15Is for overhead cover would just about do it. But I’m fairly certain we won’t get that kind of support,” laughed Willy Perez, one of their designated forward air controllers.

“I might, and I stress might, be able to get you an AC-130 for on call support. As for the A-10s, yeah, forget that. They are all preparing for the cross channel assault. I might be able to get you some A-2s though, depending on the situation. The range might be a bit of a problem, but with the proper tanker assets, it could work. Air cover shouldn’t be an issue as we have somewhat regular patrols this far in. Let me see what kind of magic I can work,” said the Colonel.

“What kind of timeline are we looking at,” asked Rick.

“Within a week or so. Ten days at most to the time you go wheels up,” said the Colonel.

“That’s kind of cutting it close, Colonel. We do need some time to prepare,” said Scott Carlson.

“They felt it was best to cut it a little closer than normal since once these missions go down, the IU will know we are about to start the invasion. I’m sorry, but that’s the reason. I tried to convince them otherwise, but the FNC General Staff wouldn’t listen,” said the Colonel apologetically.

“We can still do it within the time frame. We will just need-” said Michael as he was cut off by the giant voice system.

“ALARM RED...ALARM RED...INBOUND MISSILES AND AIRCRAFT...ALARM RED...ALARM RED...INBOUND MISSILES AND AIRCRAFT” droned the speakers from the outside and the voice was replaced by the wavering tone indicating enemy attack.

“Get to the air raid bunkers!” ordered Thomas as everyone grabbed their weapons and started moving towards the door.

“I’ll get the stuff secured. Get to the shelters!” shouted Mike Dugger as he quickly started popping connections on the laptop computer and grabbing the intelligence materials to throw back into the safe and lock it up.

The other eighteen personnel quickly fled the room and headed for the nearest air raid shelters at top speed. The Colonel was basically drug along since he was unfamiliar with the layout of the base and more or less followed the group. An explosion on the south side of the base at the Patriot Battery was seen and heard by the group as well as other explosions near the short range air defenses. The group got into the bunker just as the Royal Air Force F-20 alert fighters were pulling from their protective revetments and racing down the runway to intercept the intruders.

The first missile landed near the aircraft parking apron, thankfully empty, in a thunderous boom. Other explosions were heard as more missiles landed on the base and the high pitched shriek of MiG engines was heard as the aircraft had arrived. More explosions were heard as bombs found their mark. They group hunkered down in the bunker and found the remainder of their friends and family had picked the same bunker they had. They all said a silent prayer hoping none of the bombs or missiles found their tiny protective haven.

“Well, Colonel, we promised you a show. You are going to get your nickel’s worth,” laughed Thomas.

“And all this time I thought I was going to have a boring day,” he laughed back, a little nervous.

“Hey Tom, where’s my Dad?” asked Nancy Dugger as she made her way through the cramped shelter.

“He was right behind us locking everything up. He might have gone to the shelter to the south of Jabba,” said Thomas, wondering what might have taken him so long to finish up. Suddenly it was quiet out as no more explosions were heard. Fires could be heard crackling nearby, but no more attacks were imminent they knew about.

After another five minutes of silence and the giant voice came back on again. “ALL CLEAR...ALL CLEAR...POST ATTACK ACTIONS NOW AUTHORIZED...ALL CLEAR...ALL CLEAR...UXO SWEEPS NOW AUTHORIZED...NON-ESSENTIAL PERSONNEL REPORT TO DUTY STATION FOR ACCOUNTABILITY...REPORT ALL

UXO'S TO THE BASE COMMAND POST...ALL CLEAR...ALL CLEAR," said the voice once again.

It was the responsibility of each and every bunker to sweep in a hundred meter radius around their bunkers for unexploded ordnance and call in to the command post if it was all clear. Teams were quickly formed and sent out in pairs looking for the dangerous items which could still kill after the attack.

Thomas was paired off with his usual partner, Amber as they left the bunker along with three other pairs. It was far easier to quarter the area rather than the concentric circle method. After walking for twenty five meters outside, Amber suddenly stopped and looked, gasping "oh my God" under her breath.

Thomas followed her gaze outward and saw a body lying in the middle of the field. Another shriek was heard from their left.

"NOOOOOOO!" screamed Nancy Dugger as she ran through the uncleared area towards her father lying face down in the grass.

CHAPTER 3 – SHOES TO FILL

Date/Time: 4 March/1528 Local

Location: RAF Bassingbourn, Cambridgeshire County, Great Britain

“NANCY! NO!” yelled Thomas as he saw her sprinting across the field towards her father. Nancy was one of the slender types that could out run a gazelle when she wanted to and Thomas was in no position to intercept. She was running at full force, not caring about what was around her at that moment. Amber was in a position to chase her down and ran the distance while looking at the ground all the way, wary of bomblets that might have been on a delayed fuse. The tackle was one any NFL lineman would have been proud of. While Nancy was thin, Amber was built like a brick outhouse, toned up in long hours on the makeshift weight pile, running five to eight miles a day and humping around a sixty pound pack and another thirty pounds of gear on missions.

Even after getting slammed on the ground, Nancy still attempted to get to her father lying fifty yards away. Her screams crossed the entire base it seemed like.

“DAD! DAD, CAN YOU HEAR ME? I’M COMING!” she screamed and struggled to get out of the grasp Amber had her in. By this time, Thomas had made his way over to her.

“NANCY! NO! LET US GET IT CLEARED FIRST!” yelled Amber as she attempted to keep her on the ground.

“NO! I HAVE TO GET TO HIM! HE COULD JUST BE HURT!” she screamed and wiggled further.

Seeing Amber had her pinned on the ground for the moment, he yelled back for Scott to bring his medical kit through the area which had been swept already. Thomas went ahead carefully, mindful of trip wires and other booby traps along the way. He was within ten meters of Mike when he found a bomblet that either hadn’t exploded or was on a time delay.

“PEANUT! PEANUT! PEANUT!” he yelled to everyone, the code word for finding a UXO. He immediately looked around and hit the ground, careful to observe the item from lower down.

“TOM! WE NEED TO GET TO HIM!” yelled Scott from behind, also on the ground now, but worried about his friend.

Thomas inched forward, keeping a wary eye out for the tripwires that sometimes came with the IU ordnance. He wasn’t sure if it was a mine or a bomblet that failed to detonate, so he played the worst case scenario thinking it was a mine. But like most aircraft delivered mines, they all left telltales of their intended purpose. Thomas couldn’t find anything about the UXO that made it suspicious except the fact it didn’t detonate like it was supposed to. So instead of heading straight in, he went wide around the item and came in from the side to Mike.

“IT’S CLEAR TO THE RIGHT SIDE!” said Thomas and he continued his way to Mike, keeping a low profile and low crawling towards Mike.

Scott did the same thing when he got closer, moving at a high crawl towards the wounded man. But the time he got to him, Thomas closed his eyes and shook his head ever so slightly so hopefully Nancy wouldn’t see.

“Let me check just to make sure,” said Scott as he crawled up closer and felt for a pulse in the neck. He shouldn’t have bothered as he saw the entry hole just behind Mike’s ear. There was no exit wound visible, or his helmet hid it.

Scott dropped his head and took in a deep breath. Nancy saw him do it and redoubled her efforts to get to her father, screaming the whole time. Two others came from the bunker to assist after calling in the Nine Line UXO report to the command post. The base was always well prepared for the event of unexploded ordnance and an EOD truck was sent to the scene quickly since the Nine Line Report was also followed by a Nine Line MEDEVAC request. The rest of the area had been cleared and declared safe.

The truck came screaming up the taxiway siren wailing the entire way. Thomas saw it was one of the new types of systems that protected both the skilled EOD techs and the facilities nearby from bomblets. The system has been built by an enterprising young Captain from the AFNAS and adopted by almost every nation in the FNC. A four sided pyramid approximately five feet high by four feet at the base was on the back of the truck and built with high grade steel with a touch of depleted uranium and Kevlar for good measure. The cone would be placed on top of the UXO and four blasts would drive the spiked corners into the ground and a fifth a split second later would send out a shotgun like pattern of steel shot inside the pyramid. The explosion would detonate any UXO inside and one could stand right next to the pyramid and only be jarred slightly by the detonation inside. The only part that typically needed replacing were the corners and they bolted on easy enough.

The EOD team, also from Columbia, saw the wounded man and hurried up as quickly as they could. The more experienced English speakers were off near the flightline dealing with a 500 kilogram bomb which failed to detonate near the alert bunkers. Trying to remember what to say in English, he broke it up into simple words he knew.

“YOU STOP...NO MOVE!” yelled the *Sargento Segundo* (Second Sergeant) from the vehicle as they swung around and got the crane ready to place the pyramid on the bomblet. Thomas pointed it out for their benefit, although the white cloth that was once the parachute used to slow the device of death was visible to them.

The *Sargento Segundo* got out of the vehicle, an old style Interceptor vest with the side SAPI kit installed hanging on his shoulders, but with the Velcro undone in the front. Walking a little closer to them, he finally put on his helmet and eyeballed the UXO from about ten feet. His partner, a *Cabo Tercero* (Third Corporal) backed the truck up slowly until the *Sargento Segundo* yelled for him to stop and held up his hand. He scampered onto the back of the truck where the

controls for the small crane were located and swiftly centered the pyramid over the top and started to lower it down. When it was within two feet of the ground, he cut the cable and hit the explosive charges a moment later just as the device hit the ground. The distinctive triple boom of the device (one for the charges driving the corners into the ground, the second of the “shotgun round” inside the device and the third of the UXO exploding) was heard and the area was once again safe.

Nancy could be held back no longer. Breaking away from Amber’s grasp (she actually let her go) she sprinted the way across to the area where her father was lying. Scott managed to stop her just in time, whispering louder than he probably intended. “It’s going to be okay...it’s going to be okay...it was quick.”

“NOOOO!” she screamed once again and broke out crying uncontrollably. He released her to go to her father where she grabbed him and hugged him in close, crying hysterically and speaking unintelligibly. Nobody knew quite what to do since they had never seen Nancy this way before. Fun loving and always with a smile, they saw her entire world devastated in a single moment. Finally, Scott moved back towards her and took her around the shoulders, pulling her away gently and letting her cry as long as she wanted to cry on his shoulder. Next to her father, Scott was the closest thing to family she had at that time. Her mother and sister were off on two separate missions, somewhere in Normandy behind the lines for the next five to seven days.

“We need to get his wife and other daughter back, ASAP,” said Thomas to the Colonel, now standing with the group.

“Where are they?” asked the Colonel.

“His wife is with Captain Shannon Parsons near Dieppe and his other daughter is with Major Mark Williams in Le Havre. Neither are due back for the next five days or longer,” said Thomas.

“I will get a replacement down there as quick as I can get them mustered up. You are more familiar with their individual missions than I am. Have anyone in mind that hasn’t been tagged already?” asked the Colonel.

“Jill Dugger is providing designated marksman support to a four man recon team and Candy is the commo specialist for another eight man team. I can ask around,” said Thomas.

“Let me know,” said the Colonel and stopped talking. Nobody seemed to be in the mood for it right then. It was hard losing someone while they were supposed to be safe in the rear. Their first combat loss, which happened while the group was still in Texas, had shocked the group, but the person had been hit during a mission and went down firing. This was so...Thomas couldn’t even think of a good word to use to describe his feelings at that very moment and still couldn’t think of a word to use when he wrote a long letter to Sharon later on that evening.

The medics arrived and pronounced him dead upon their arrival, which wasn't any great news to those standing around. However, before they attempted to put him in a body bag, the team intervened.

"We'll take him from here," said Greg Henry.

"I understand he was on your team and all, but we have a job to do," said the IDMT as he made the mistake of trying to move past Greg. He was stopped by Darren who took him off to the side and spoke very softly that the team would be taking him to mortuary affairs themselves, thank you very much and please leave now because I don't know if we will be able to contain ourselves if you press the matter.

The IDMT saw the look in Darren's eyes and how Greg was poised for some form of action. He collected his other two medics and departed in the ambulance to additional calls of wounded soldiers and airmen on the base. The Patriot battery had been hit especially hard both by radar seeking stealth cruise missiles and by a conventional small arms attack by a strike team from the IU. Like the Japanese kamikaze warriors from World War II, these soldiers knew they probably would never see home again and made every effort to kill as many infidels as possible before going to Paradise to be with Allah.

The group formed ranks silently and carried Mike on the stretcher, now covered in a sheet to a nearby open bed truck. Those that couldn't ride walked alongside the vehicle all the way across base to the morgue. Word quickly spread to the rest of the group from the Ranch and the entire group gathered at the morgue to pay their respects to the recently departed, giving all he had for the price of freedom and justice.

"Hey Amy," said Thomas later on after they had finally departed the morgue. Nancy was with her closest friends, her teammates as well as the chaplain designated for the group. It would be rough for her to continue and Thomas knew it. Her team wasn't supposed to be doing anything before Operation Phoenix, so it gave her plenty of time to mourn her loss. Having her family around would help matters. Which was why Thomas sought out Amy.

"Tom! I heard what happened and came as quickly as I could. I'm so sorry about what happened," said Amy Kerns with a tear in her eye. She gave him a hug (as most of the group had hugged at some point during the day) which lasted a bit longer than usual. She had been off training at another site, practicing her long range fire as she usually did.

"Thanks, but we are going to need some help," he said.

"Anything you need, you got it," she said, wiping the tear from her face.

“Jill Dugger is off on mission on the mainland and needs to be replaced. Her mission is supposed to go for another five days before ex-fil. I’m looking for a volunteer to take her place,” said Thomas.

“Don’t bother anyone else. Give me an hour to get my gear and I’m off. Who do I need to contact and where?” she asked, getting a grip on her emotions.

“I don’t know yet, but thanks for volunteering. Just grab your stuff and get ready to head out. Meet at Jabba for the full mission brief and transportation,” he said as he was thinking of someone to replace Candy, the comms specialist for her team. He spoke with Al Watson, one of the “new members” of the Ranch who transferred in from the farm in Nebraska after the first year there. Watson immediately volunteered and went off to collect his field gear and communications kit. They would both get a general brief as conditions on the ground probably had changed from the time they inserted into the mainland.

The rest of the evening was spent in quiet silence. Mike would be taken to the American cemetery near Colchester for burial since none of the dead were being sent home, much like World War II. The service was planned for the day after next since there typically wasn’t a full funeral overseas, just a quiet memorial service with close comrades. Thomas caught up with the Colonel in the evening before he made his status report to headquarters.

“I have the two replacements you need and they can go whenever you pull the trigger,” said Thomas after he saluted.

“We caught a break on one. Whoever is replacing the daughter is going to be catching a ride on an Osprey on an underground resupply mission over the continent. The LZ picked out is less than a ten minute divert from the original route so we don’t have to task another aircraft,” said the Colonel.

“And Candy’s mission?” asked Thomas.

“I’m still waiting for word on that. It might be a solo helo trip in and they are looking to see if there is anything in that area. There is an underground cell nearby they have wanted to resupply for a while, but we haven’t made contact with them yet. I was heading for the secure line to try and chase down the info on it if you want to tag along,” said the Colonel. “Are your troops ready for the briefings?”

“Yeah, standing by over at Jabba,” said Thomas.

“I’ve got a mission planner heading that way where they can look at the packages,” said the Colonel before he got quiet.

“Something on your mind you want to share?” asked Thomas, kind of knowing what he was about to ask.

“I don’t want to sound jaded to the fact you just lost one of your own, but are you still going to be able to go with your mission?” asked the Colonel.

“Yes. I was going to ask Kerns if she wanted to do a quick turn once she got back from her mission and head back out with us,” said Thomas.

“You think she can get up to speed in time?” asked the Colonel.

“I wouldn’t have mentioned it if I didn’t think so,” said Thomas.

“Less than three days of training before you go back out is cutting it kind of close,” said the Colonel.

“Anytime we get sent out we cut it kind of close. You know me well enough to know that,” said Thomas.

“Yeah, you do have some close calls from time to time,” said the Colonel. “It’s your call and I might suggest you pick someone else, but you know your people better than I do.”

“The problem is having a talented enough designated marksman to go along with us. There aren’t that many folks who have that particular skill set that I’m comfortable enough with to pick up at the last minute. I’m also looking at those teams tagged for Phoenix and not raping them so much since they need their teammates as much as I do,” said Thomas.

“Again, your choice, but I might consider someone else instead,” said the Colonel.

“I’ll take it under advisement,” said Thomas.

“I’ve got the official story behind the attack. It wasn’t just us that got hit, but bases all over England, Ireland and even a long range attack against Iceland. Apparently they know we are almost prepared for the invasion and have redoubled their efforts to hit us as hard as they can. Stealth cruise missiles hit the radar sites all over the country followed up by very coordinated commando attacks and airstrikes. They were hitting the invasion pre-staging bases as much as they could and did so while we had a bunch of our fighters off covering airstrikes on the mainland. Even so, we think we got at least a quarter of their fighters and bombers,” said the Colonel.

“How bad were we compared to others out there?” asked Thomas.

“We weren’t too bad, not like RAF Bentwaters and Elvington. Those bases got hit really hard with fuel air explosives, napalm and delayed action ordnance. Elvington is where the Italian Forces Airmobile Brigade was staged at and they were out in the open when the airstrikes hit. The facilities at both locations got hit hard as well and they are estimating it will be up to ten days before they can start flying ops again,” said the Colonel.

“We got hit fairly hard here too, a Mike Dugger is hard to replace,” said Thomas.

“I understand that and I wish you and your team my condolences,” said the Colonel.

“You are welcome to the memorial and wake when we get them set up. I’m waiting to talk to Candy about it when she gets back,” said Thomas.

“I’ll be there. I understand Dugger didn’t care for officers too much, but I owe him that,” said the Colonel.

“He actually had good things to say about you, so he wouldn’t mind if you made an appearance,” said Thomas.

“Send me a message when you get everything set up. If there is nothing else, I’ll head on over to the intel shack and talk to the two heading out tonight and see what the travel arrangements are for the second individual. Oh, your German contact is on his way and should be here sometime tonight,” said the Colonel.

“He know where to go when he gets here?” asked Thomas.

“You all are pretty famous on base, I’m sure someone can send him your way,” said the Colonel.

“I won’t hold you up any longer then,” said Thomas, ready to go off by himself and sort his emotions. In the face of his team, he needed to be the strong leader, but by himself, he could come to terms with what happened. Nothing had changed much since the Fall with him still taking on a lot of responsibility and bottling up his emotions. But he did find solace in hand writing letters to Sharon. It was a way of shedding some emotions by being able to tell someone he trusted with no reservation what he was feeling. Of course he trusted his team, but the burden of command often kept him from discussing his true feelings. About the only person who knew his burden was Amber and she was always supportive of him and lent an ear when he needed it.

He collected up his vest, helmet and weapons and loaded the body armor and helmet into a pack for a walk around the base. While they weren’t supposed to be going off alone unless they were training, there were well traveled pathways around the base where the personnel tended to walk alone and sort out their feelings. Shouldering the pack and his carbine, he walked along and thought about everything that had happened that day.

Eventually, he sorted out what he could and left for the barracks where the rest of his team was in silence for the most part. Sitting down at his bunk and shedding the extra weight, he pulled out a notepad and started to write a letter to Sharon in the light of the oil lamp burning the used cooking oil from the mess facilities. It was just another way of conserving everything they had on base by using everything to the fullest extent possible. Since the presence of over an additional three million individuals might task the British Isles more than usual, everything was used, reused, used once again and then they would find other uses for it even after that.

He was deep into the letter to Sharon when he suddenly felt the presence of another individual near him. Originally he thought it was Amber returning to her bunk, but when the presence he

felt didn't go away he finally was forced to take notice of who was standing next to his bunk. He sat the pen down and prepared to look up when a booming voice startled him.

"Guten Abend, Herr Major," said the deep voice, not loudly, but seemingly louder than normal.

Looking up, Thomas saw a most formidable individual standing over him looking down. Six foot five and weighing in at around two fifty, there didn't seem to be an ounce of fat on him. Blond hair and blue eyes completed the features of the individual who would have been a recruiting poster member of the SS in World War II. Their German contact had arrived.

CHAPTER 4 – TO THOSE GONE BEFORE

Date/Time: 4 March/2203 Local

Location: RAF Bassingbourn, Cambridgeshire County, Great Britain

“*Guten abend* as well. Do I know you?” asked Thomas.

“*Ich bin...* I am Jarvis Werner of the *Freie Bundeswehr*, Master Sergeant of Infantry. I was told to come to your unit to... *unterstützen...* help with a mission,” said the man standing over the bunk.

“Yes, please sit, Master Sergeant. I’m afraid my *Deutsch* is not really that good, but we have a couple of people who can assist with translation,” said Thomas as he waved to the makeshift chair by the bed.

“*Danke schön, Herr Major.* I am afraid my English is not so good, but I know some,” said Werner taking the seat that was offered. He was almost too large to sit in it.

“You seem to speak it well enough for our purposes. Do you know why you are here?” asked Thomas, sitting up on the edge of the bed.

“*Nein*, I was told you needed a German to help with a...operation is correct word?” asked Werner.

“*Ja*, an operation. We will need to speak to you tomorrow morning about the operation. Have you eaten tonight?” asked Thomas.

“*Nein*, I was ordered to leave immediately and we were...*gestoppt*, I mean halted when the attacks came,” said Werner.

“We have some rations if you are hungry,” said Thomas.

“*Danke*, I would like that,” said Werner.

Thomas rose and brought over the half full case of field rations as well as some goodies sent by the members of the Ranch in Colorado. Werner was unfamiliar with the English names on the exterior of the wrappers for the MREs until Amber showed back up and assisted. Her German was long unused, but had been refreshed recently since their operating areas now ranged into Germany. Since he was now a guest in their “home,” she picked one of the better meals and tossed the main pouch into the pot of hot water on top of the wood stove to heat up.

Speaking with him, she found out just how bad her German was or, more specifically, her lack of regional dialect was. She asked him several times to slow down and repeat what was being said

and even then had a hard time guessing some of the words he was using. But it would be best for her to practice in advance like this and she picked up the regional inflection quickly.

The entire group made their way over at some point to introduce themselves and thank the man for helping out while he was eating. Again, the building of friendships and confidence would go a long way in gaining his help in what they were about to do. But even so, they were a polite bunch and welcomed the guest into the fold with no reservations. After he had eaten, they had already secured a spare bunk for him although his large frame wasn't really sized right for the cot and thin mattress. It was almost comical to see him attempting to get into the bed.

“Coming up on the LZ in five minutes,” announced the door gunner in the CV-22C Osprey aircraft to Amy Kerns as they made their way across northern France. “We made contact with the team and they are standing by.”

“Thanks,” was all Amy said as she gathered her pack and rifle to get off the aircraft when they hit the ground. The ride had been rough as the unit from the 1st Special Operations Wing of the United States Air Force had been nap of the earth the whole flight as they tossed out ammunition, explosives, equipment and arms to the various underground resistance groups along their route. She performed one last check of her equipment before moving towards the rear of the aircraft.

The five minutes seemed to take forever until she felt the aircraft start to slow and go from airplane mode to helicopter mode again to land. She saw the pilots wearing their night vision scanning the horizon and turned quickly when they must have spotted the infrared beam directed at the aircraft. The aircraft slowed even further, but still coming in quickly for the landing as the crew felt no reason to be on the ground for any longer than they needed to be. Both for their own protection and the protection of the ground force they were swapping out a member for. They didn't know why exactly, but they figured if someone was being pulled off a mission on the mainland in a rush it couldn't be good.

Amy saw the rear doors coming open and the gunners activating their miniguns to provide fire if needed. The ground was coming up rapidly and she braced herself as the main gear thumped the ground. Using her night vision, she saw the spectral outlines of the team members gathering near the rear of the aircraft, two facing outward to provide security and the other two making their way towards the ramp. Amy jumped off and was immediately met by Major Mark Williams and Corporal Jill Dugger. Jill had joined the militia at the bare minimum age and recently transferred into the group after completing the Selection and Training mandatory for joining the teams operating in the field. She was on her second mission and was surprised she was being pulled off.

“Amy! What is going on?” yelled Jill over the sound of the rotors.

“I’m taking your place on the team and you are heading back,” said Amy, avoiding telling her why.

“I know, but why am I being pulled?” asked Jill.

“I’m not the one that should be telling you. But it’s your father...” said Amy and didn’t complete the statement.

“WHAT ABOUT MY FATHER?” she yelled.

“WE’VE GOT TO GO! WE’VE BEEN ON THE GROUND TOO LONG!” yelled the door gunner from the aircraft, waving at Jill.

“Get with Nancy when you get back. It’s better to hear it from her,” said Amy as she gently pushed Jill towards the aircraft.

Jill knew the aircraft and her team was at risk if she stayed to ask more questions. It wouldn’t be a long flight back to England and she would have her answers soon enough. She collected her pack and ran onto the aircraft, being helped by the loadmaster who grabbed her hand and pulled her in.

Amy made contact with Mark Williams and shook his hand as the aircraft jumped back into the sky; doors closing as it rapidly gained altitude and forward speed.

“What is going on?” asked Mark.

“Her father was killed in an air raid this morning,” said Amy as she chambered a round in her M465, the designated marksman weapon of the teams. The M465 was the 6.5 Grendel version of the gas piston Mk 12 SPR design with an 18 inch barrel and highly regarded by those who used it. She also chambered a round in her pistol and put it back in the holster.

“Oh no...” said Mark as he had also lost a friend. But for the moment, he needed to put his emotions behind him and concentrate on completing the recon mission. “Are you ready to move? We need to put some distance between us and this LZ.”

“Ready when you are,” announced Amy in a hushed tone. She put her emotions in check as well and prepared to get under way. The team fell in without being told and headed to the south away from the small area they had used as a landing zone.

The scene repeated itself with Candy as she was pulled from her mission without much of an explanation either. However, she was old enough to know something was horribly wrong. Mike had been a member of the Special Forces before the Fall and she knew if someone was being

pulled this quickly from a mission, the reason was never good. The Blackhawk dumped its cargo of ammunition and explosives for the resistance group which they had finally made contact with and headed back across the English Channel to their home base. From there, Candy would be picked up by the same CV-22 which picked up Jill and flown back to Bassingbourn. The Colonel had pulled a lot of strings to have a special flight arranged for the mother and daughter, but in this case, decency and common courtesy prevailed over the military bureaucracy.

The next morning the group met at breakfast joined by their new German friend. The mood was still quiet since they were still somewhat in shock over losing one of their own. Candy and Jill had gotten in early that morning and been met by the entire group. Again they had cried together as they had lost a close friend and family member. After getting cleaned up and meeting with the chaplain, Candy, Nancy and Jill had spent a lot of time together alone. The group had let them know if they needed anything to let them know, they would be around for them if needed.

“We need to plan the memorial ceremony quick for Mike. I hate to put it that way, but we still have the mission to get done,” said Thomas.

“We kinda figured that. Tomorrow?” asked Darren.

“Yeah, think you can find a place for the wake?” asked Thomas.

“I’m sure I can find a place. What’s the plan for today?” asked Darren.

“Nothing. I think it’s best to give everyone a little time to sort through their emotions and take a little time for themselves and friends,” said Thomas.

“Best idea I’ve heard in a long time,” said Darren. “What time tomorrow?”

“I will check with Candy in a little while. I hope she understands,” said Thomas.

“She always said she knew it could happen and accepted the fact. But I still don’t think she was prepared for it. After making it through the Fall, the times after, the invasion and us reclaiming North America, Iceland, England and all the missions we have done before now, you would have thought we all could die of old age in our sleep a long time from now. But we are not invincible,” said Darren.

“For in that sleep of death what dreams may come, when we have shuffled off this mortal coil,” said Thomas, thinking of what had been said.

“You seem to be able to dredge up the interesting quotes from time to time,” said Darren, thinking of what had been said.

“Shakespeare. I bought the entire collection once upon a time and finally got down to reading it after the Fall. I mean, Sharon and I had to have something to do except going off creating entertainment for ourselves as George used to put it,” said Thomas with half a smile.

“Learn anything useful?” asked Darren with a wry smile.

“Yeah, uneducated fools like yourself should read more,” laughed Thomas. “Thanks for diverting my mind off this for even the briefest moment.”

“We’ve got a job to do and this wasn’t the best timing. But we will get by,” said Darren. “Any thought on whom we might get to replace Mike?”

“I was thinking about that and possibly Amy, but that’s a pretty quick turn for her. I mean, it’s up to Michael really, but we have some say in that matter,” said Thomas.

“How about Johnny? I know it’s the whole thing about two members of the family on the same mission, but special circumstances and all. Plus we do it with Heather and Rob Davis,” said Darren.

“You sure about that? I mean, it’s not in France or the Netherlands like a lot of ours are. This one could get pretty mean,” said Thomas.

“He earned his rite of passage I think,” chuckled Darren, very proud of his son. He had grown up to become one of the better members of the teams and made his father very proud in how well he performed. Darren didn’t go out of his way to brag about his son, but when the opportunity came up, he often did.

“It’s a thought we can bring up to Michael. Speaking of kids, how is Nicole doing?” asked Thomas.

“Pretty well. She is set to head out for flight school at any time now,” said Darren, again proud of his family.

“Going to be an attack pilot and save Dad’s sorry butt someday?” asked Thomas.

“Nope, she wants to fly that new recon plane they are developing, the SR-99 I think is the designation they decided on,” said Darren.

“She better get in line, everyone wants that ride and with her being an enlisted pilot, the odds aren’t good,” said Thomas, remembering the mach five stealthy recon aircraft so recently developed by Northrop.

“I would settle for a nice safe cargo route between Dover and Lakenheath for her,” said Darren, always the worried father.

“Your little girl grew up, Daddy,” said Thomas, thinking of the day when Angel would go on her own way in the world. He dreaded the day when she would start coming of age and bringing home a new boyfriend. Lucky for him, Sharon would be keeping the boys in check until Thomas could return home to be the “mean Daddy.” He didn’t think the war would go on for that long, but one never knew.

“Yeah, it seems like yesterday when she was the little girl who had me wrapped around her finger,” sighed Darren.

“So today she is a big girl who has daddy wrapped around her finger,” laughed Thomas.

“Okay, good point. But like you are any different with your own daughters,” laughed Darren, knowing full well Thomas had Angel who wrapped him up any time he was around. Plus the newest child that had been born while they were fighting in Europe.

“I never said that,” laughed Thomas.

“How is your little one doing?” asked Darren.

“Sharon says she is getting to be a handful. I got new pictures the other day,” said Thomas, whipping out the photos of the newest Dayfield to the clan, Hope.

“Getting big already,” observed Darren. “And this is from the same mother who stated defiantly there would be no more children in the Dayfield household.”

“Whoops! Guess that leave before we shipped out for Europe did the trick. We kind of discussed it at one point and decided to leave it in God’s hands. If it happened, it happened. Guess He works in mysterious ways,” said Thomas, proud of the child he had never seen with his own eyes.

“It always seems to be that way,” said Darren.

“Let’s go track down Michael and ask him about what he thinks about adding Johnny to his team,” said Thomas.

They wandered through the area until they found Michael writing in his journal as usual. He often wrote out what was happening day by day and halfheartedly joked about writing the “great American novel” to be published one day. They pitched their idea to him and he agreed it had merit and would let them know after thinking it over.

Darren, Thomas and Michael then collected a few others and started planning a memorial service for Mike. The nearby village had a pub that would be suitable for the wake afterwards. They made contact with the owners and explained the situation and were assured they would have no problems getting everyone in who would be attending. They caught up with Amber who had been showing their new German friend around along with Nate Clark.

“Get our new friend up to speed?” asked Thomas.

“No, we were waiting to talk to you about that,” said Amber. “Just showing him around and practicing our German.”

“Fair enough. We do need to get him briefed in on the situation and the mission before long. Just so we can have an idea of the ground level view before we get too much further into it,” said Darren.

Amber turned and spoke in German to Jarvis. He paused to think of the area and spoke back in German to her. “He says he know exactly where we are heading to and has been to that area many times,” she said.

“When was the last time he was there?” asked Darren.

Amber translated the question into German and received a reply. “He said not long before he came across the Channel to England. But it’s been four years,” she said.

“Go ahead and get a ground assessment done, give him the METT-T brief and get as much intel as we can about the area and surrounding areas to include potential drop zones and helo landing areas,” said Thomas.

“Okay, we will be over at Jabba if you need us. When is the memorial service?” asked Amber.

“Tomorrow. We were on our way to talk to Candy,” said Darren.

“Let us know if you need any help,” said Nate.

The three walked off towards the intelligence hut where they would brief in Jarvis on the generics of the mission and get his unique view of the ground level surrounding the site. Michael, Thomas and Darren were met by Rick and made their way over to the barracks facility where Candy, Jill and Nancy were together, bringing comfort in each other’s company.

“Ladies, we came to see how you all are doing,” said Michael when they had knocked and given permission to enter. The Dugger family looked devastated.

“Please, come in,” said Candy, wiping the tears from her face.

“I’m really sorry about what happened,” began Rick, who hadn’t been able to meet the family when they had returned that morning.

“Thank you,” was all Candy was able to choke out before starting to cry again.

“If now is a bad time, we can come back sometime else,” said Michael.

“No, no, please stay,” said Candy as she waved the four to seats nearby.

“I know it may not be the best time, but we have to get the memorial for Mike planned soon. We have another mission that can’t be postponed,” said Darren.

“When are you looking at doing it?” asked Candy.

“He is scheduled to be buried tomorrow afternoon and we thought it would be best to do it in the early morning,” said Thomas. It was a common practice to have the burials done as quickly as possible.

“That will be okay and you know Mike would have wanted to have a wake in his honor,” said Candy.

“We planned on having one at the Pig and Abbot in the town,” said Darren.

“He loved that place. That would be fine,” said Candy.

“Tomorrow evening then,” said Candy. “What time is the memorial?”

“Tomorrow morning at ten thirty. We will be having it at the outdoor chapel,” said Thomas.

“Okay, if it’s just the same to you gentlemen, we would like more time alone please,” said Candy.

“Absolutely. If you need anything at all, please don’t hesitate to let us know,” said Michael.

“Who is taking Dad’s place on the mission?” asked Nancy.

“We haven’t decided yet, but it might be Johnny Thompson,” said Thomas.

Nancy didn’t reply more than nodding her head and looked at her mother. Darren, Michael, Thomas and Rick decided to give the family more time to themselves and go sort their own emotions.

CHAPTER 5 – MEMORIES

Date/Time: 6 March/0927 Local

Location: RAF Bassingbourn, Cambridgeshire County, Great Britain

Thomas strode up to the front of the gathered group at the outdoor chapel with a purpose. As commanding officer, he knew it was his place to speak in front of the gathered group. As Mike's friend, he knew it was mandatory to speak in front of the group. In the case of a man like Mike Dugger, Thomas considered it a privilege. Word had spread and there were more people at the chapel area than Thomas could count. Mike was a friendly guy who was able to instantly put people at ease and create lasting friendships. Members of the Columbian contingent on base were on hand along with the RAF members, the Poles and every member of the 14th Special Operations Battalion on base. Crews of the various aircraft that supported the teams had made a special trip as well as the support personnel who had been befriended by Mike. Even Brigadier General Craig Starkes and Command Chief Master Sergeant Dale Savage were informed and drove the way from RAF Lakenheath to be at the memorial service and wake. They both had returned into the Air Force after the invasion and were the commander and senior enlisted of all the base security detachments in England and Ireland. Several others had spoken before him, reading Mike's meritorious service and speaking of the man. Thomas would speak and then be followed by the family. Taking in a deep breath, he began to speak.

"Mike Dugger was a good soldier, an ardent patriot and most importantly, a friend. We all came to know Mike after he came to the Ranch not long after the Fall and stood by his side when he was at odds with those he might have called friends at one point. We took him in and offered him shelter when he needed it and repaid us a thousand fold by standing with us without reservation. But more than that, he paid us in the best gift he could have ever given, which was the gift of friendship."

"Mike dedicated his life to his friends and those who could not stand up for themselves. His career was started in the United States Army and moved on to contractor work and to us after the Fall. Upon hearing of the threats to his home, he volunteered for Militia duty in Texas and was a founding member of the North American Union Freedom Guards. And continuing to fight, he liberated people in six countries on two continents, without reservation and without regard to his own health. He did so out of friendship. Not over friendships he had at the moment, but on the promise of a gained friendship from those he helped liberate. And in that promise of new friendships, Mike fought without regard for those he didn't even know. He followed the motto of the Special Forces even in the last moments of his life. *De oppresso liber*, to free the oppressed. This was his life's mission, a mission he was faithful to."

"Mike was a faithful man. A faithful man who cared about his family, his friends and his loved ones. A man who would put their needs before his. A Christian man faithful to those who opposed the evils which set out to destroy God's work. A man who selflessly sacrificed his life on the altar of freedom. 'Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called.' This Bible verse always reminded me of Mike. He always fought the good

fight and was faithful to the cause he was fighting for. His eternal life was always one of helping people. A man who will not be able to see the fruits of his labors, but knew we would always succeed. I am proud to call Mike my friend and I know he is going off to a better place,” concluded Thomas with a tear escaping his eye, one of the rare occasions he showed his emotions like this in public.

Candy and Jill were unable to speak in front of the group and Nancy would represent the family. She stood and moved to the front, tears already coming down her face. Taking in deep breaths, she began to speak.

“It’s hard to follow up what Thomas said, but I will try. To most of you, Michael Dugger was a friend, but to me, he was Daddy. I was always a Daddy’s girl from the first moments I can remember. When I was young, I used to remember he would be gone in faraway places working with the Army, but when he got home, he always would take the time for Jill and me. Even when he was most busy, I would demand his time and he would stop what he was doing and take the opportunity to spend time with us. I always loved my father and always knew he loved me.”

“It is true he paid the ultimate price for freedom and it is true he was faithful. But most importantly, he was always faithful to his family. He had the foresight to prepare us for the worst and ensure our survival through the Fall. His unconditional love for us guaranteed our survival and his faith helped us continue on when we thought all was lost. My father never thought of himself first, but only of his family and friends. And we loved him for it. I know I gave my Dad a hard time every now and then, but his love for me was always there. And getting older, I loved him even more. We’ve grown closer over the past few years and I’ve come to love my father even more. I’m going to miss my father, but I know he would want me to continue on. I know he would be proud for me to continue the work he started. I already miss him so much. Daddy, I know you can hear me and I want you to know I miss you and I love you so much...” she said as her voice trailed off and she broke down crying.

The entire group was crying at this point. Scott Carlson went to the front of the group and guided her back to the family, hugging each of them. The chaplain went to the front after being prompted by Thomas and even he had a tear in his eye. It was one thing for friends to speak, but to see a daughter’s love for her father expressed jerked at every emotion in their bodies. Saying a closing prayer, the group silently departed and went their own ways, some back to express their emotions in private, others to the wake and still more to console the family. Jarvis Werner made his way to the family and got up the nerve to try to say what was on his mind. Even with his limited English skills he had gotten the intent of the message and shed a tear for a brother soldier who he had never known. It was the same the world around, professional soldiers knew a bond with each other no matter what nationality and could always find a common ground with each other. His English wasn’t that good, but he would give it a try.

“*Frau Dugger, I wish to aussprechen...speak my feelings for the Tod...death of your husband. I can say I spreche for the Freie Bundeswehr when I say we have lost a great Kaempfer...*” his voice trailed off as he was unsure of the translated word.

“Warrior,” said Amber from behind, helping out.

“*Genau*, a warrior from the army of freedom and all are *betriibt* by his loss. Please accept my feelings for a *guter Mann* and a *schreckliche*...Amber?” asked Jarvis.

“Terrible maybe?” she said.

“*Ja, eine schreckliche Tragödie*,” finished Jarvis in German.

“A terrible tragedy,” translated Amber.

“His loss will *betrauert werden* by all the *Deutsch* people and *geehrt* by *von allen*,” said Jarvis.

“He will be mourned by the German people and honored by all,” assisted Amber.

“Thank you,” Candy managed to say, shocked at the emotions shown by normally reserved Germans.

Candy, Jill and Nancy along with Scott Carlson would go to the American cemetery for the burial service early that afternoon and be back in time for the wake that evening. The remainder of the group moved on to the training items for the day, halfheartedly performing them as nobody was really in the mood. They called it quits early that afternoon and headed back to get cleaned up for the wake that evening.

Many in the group gathered weapons and headed into the local village to the pub designated for his wake. The British Isles had changed drastically since their liberation and the population wasn’t as alarmed by weapon carrying individuals wandering around the towns and villages, much like it had been in World War II. The Pig and Abbot was a smaller pub and the outside would be needed by the sheer numbers of people attending the wake. The members of the Ranch gathered together with pints of beer talking about the good times with Mike and everyone had a “do you remember when Mike...” story to tell, much to the amusement of everyone. Those that didn’t know him as well would listen in and politely laugh. They were joined by the family along with Scott after they had returned and joined into the conversations. Each tried to put the emotions behind them for the moment and remember the good times as opposed to the situation at hand.

The evening wore on and the teams were really not going to stay there all night, especially with the strong home brew of the tavern. They knew the next day they would be right back at the training and needed to be in tip top form. Twos and threes began leaving the tavern and making their way back to base and a large group left right before curfew, leaving the Ranch members behind to finish the last of their beers, have one last toast and be gone.

“To Mike Dugger, a friend, a patriot, a warrior, a blessing in disguise. We will carry on, but it will never be the same,” said Frank Zimmer as the final toast. Mugs clinked in response and a chorus of “to Mike Dugger” followed. Each person finished what beer was left in the mug and started getting ready to go. Thomas and Greg went to the bar to pay the tab. The owner, William, was cleaning up the unsightly mess left behind by the customers.

“Go ahead and clear out our tab, William, we are heading home,” said Thomas, going right past the silver sovereigns and straight to the gold ones. He knew it would be far easier that way with the amount of people that had been present that evening.

“The general and the man with the stripes going from his wrist to his shoulder already paid for you in advance,” said William, the owner and head bartender from Scotland in a heavy Scottish accent. He had revived the local pub after the IU had been defeated in the U.K. and the original owners killed several years before.

“They paid our tab already?” asked Thomas.

“Aye. Slapped down four ounces in gold sovereigns and told me to call if I needed more. I think the pub is only worth three ounces,” exaggerated William. “It’s safe to say you lads and lasses are paid up.”

“They shouldn’t have done that,” said Frank.

“Mike was a popular man around here and even if your general friend hadn’t paid, I’m sure your price wouldn’t have been that bad. I’m sorry to hear about his loss; he was a good man” said William.

“One of the best,” agreed Thomas as he left an ounce in silver sovereigns as a tip for the bar owner, another good man. “You have a good night and we will see you soon.”

“Heading out here soon, lad?” asked William.

“You know better than to ask because you know we can’t answer,” said Frank.

“Godspeed to you and your unit no matter where you are heading, but nonetheless come home safe,” said William, knowing the game full well.

The two said goodbye and headed out, walking a little quicker to catch up with the main group to make it to base in time for the curfew. They made it past the gate just in time and headed back to the barracks to sleep off the strong brews before they started their training in the morning. They would only need fine tuning for the mission, but they would train hard.

CHAPTER 6 – MISSION PREP

Date/Time: 7 March/0517 Local

Location: RAF Bassingbourn, Cambridgeshire County, Great Britain

The team selected woke the next morning feeling the effects of the strong beers they had consumed the night before. Grunts and groans followed as those who hadn't overindulged kicked at the bunks of those that did.

"Can't we at least wait until the sun is up?" groaned Amber as she pulled the cover up over her head.

"It's England; the sun never comes up here. Get up," said Thomas as he kicked at her bunk again.

With a groan, she threw back the cover and sat up in the bed. Wiping her face, she knew the PT and a shower after would be the best medicine for her condition. She hadn't really drank all that much, but since she didn't do it that often, it showed.

The remainder of the team did their wake up and gathered their weapons for the run that morning. Since they would often be running in combat with weapons and they had to go armed wherever they went, the group grabbed whatever weapons they would be carrying on the mission and prepared to go for the run. They were in better shape than most since they did PT almost every day, sometimes running with weapons, sometimes running with packs and weapons, sometimes with body armor and weapons, it just depended on the day. This morning would be a weapons only day since Thomas didn't want anyone getting hurt before the mission.

However, they did run in boots and uniform since, again, they would have them on during the missions. Instead of the BDU top, they went in long sleeve t-shirts with a level 1 cold weather undershirt on. The run wouldn't be that far, only five miles and they would start and finish as a group, as they always did. Johnny Thompson joined the group to replace Mike Dugger and was put on the team as the designated marksman.

They gathered up outside the barracks and headed out on the pathway around base. They would loop it twice since the path wasn't a full five miles. Others were out doing their morning PT as well and the group passed some and was passed by others. They finished the run in a little over fifty minutes, a pace they all felt was slightly slow. They knew they could do better, but were still shaking off the previous evening. After returning to the barracks and cooling down, they did calisthenics and were free to continue the workout or clean up.

Each grabbed their ditty bag and headed for the showers (these were not coed) doing their individual clean up and drinking a bunch of water. They were always drinking water it seemed like and even when the chow hall offered sodas, they stuck with the packets of Gatorade or just plain water instead. After they finished up, they headed over to the chow hall in pairs, again to

brown eggs and limp bacon with a few slices of untoasted bread on the side. Thomas made contact with everyone and let them know what time to be at the training area after breakfast and to have all their field gear with them when they showed up. He saw the Duggers sitting at a table by themselves and wandered over to check on them. Candy informed him they were doing okay that morning and best of luck on their mission. Nancy looked as if she wanted to say something, but either didn't get the nerve or chose not to ask. Thomas wondered what was on her mind, but didn't ask since she obviously had a good reason not to say anything.

He returned with Amber to the barracks and picked up his field pack, web gear and weapons. His usual POF carbine was on his shoulder, the same one he had for many years at the Ranch, although modified for semi, three round burst and full auto and "officially" designated by the military as the M4A4. His pistol was also the same Springfield XD from the Ranch given the military designation M26A1. Most of the pistols carried by the members of the group were the same ones they carried at the Ranch after the Fall. A few had to change here and there, but as long as they were standard calibers, whatever put lead downrange was good enough for the military.

They also shouldered their field packs, already loaded for a mission since they sometimes had little notice to prepare when the word came down. They were heavy, but they were used to the weight by now. It took a lot to carry around seven days worth of food and supplies. The only thing missing was the resupply of ammunition, but they had plenty of that as well. *We are supposed to be light infantry shock troops. The only shock is the weight of the packs we carry* thought Amber as she shouldered up her Kifaru and grabbed her rifle. Since she was a grenadier, she had even more weight to worry about, but felt strangely comfortable knowing she carried around enough explosives to wipe out a reinforced squad.

The rest of the team filed in and gathered their gear, but Thomas and Amber wanted to be there first since they needed to arrange for an ammunition resupply that morning. They would be doing live fire after a few dry runs at the training facility and needed the frangible ammunition in order to keep from hurting each other. They quickly walked around the end of the runway to the training facility and made contact with the range NCOIC and informed him of their needs. He sent an assistant scampering away to get the desired ammunition and called the range control for clearance to begin firing operations that morning. Unlike most ranges, prior coordination was rarely needed by the teams to use the facility. If two groups showed up at the same time, the one with the more pressing mission took priority and the other would conduct other training until the range cleared. If both had a pressing mission, a coin toss would determine who went first. It was not a complicated system, but seemed to work for the most part.

The rest of the team showed up in pairs and fours and dropped their packs with Thomas' and Amber's near the entrance of the training facility. Theft was not a big issue around here as the teams dealt swiftly and harshly with those who did steal. More than one person had tried their luck and ended up in the brig at RAF Mildenhall after sporting around their "new" gear. However, none were assigned to the Battalion. Those that did try and steal were typically assigned to the support functions on the base.

As the teams were aligning themselves, Thomas and Darren saw Nancy walk up and drop her pack on the ground. She walked over to Johnny and motioned with her head in a silent request to talk privately. After speaking for several seconds, she hugged him and he went back to the packs to collect his gear.

“Wait a second, what’s going on here?” asked Darren.

“I’m taking Johnny’s spot on the team as designated marksman,” said Nancy.

“No, you are not. You aren’t ready to go back out just yet. You need some time, Nancy,” said Michael.

“Sitting around here thinking about my father is not going to help me out. I need to get back out there and put this behind me. I loved my father, but if it had been me that had been killed, he would have been right back out there the next day if he was asked to. You didn’t ask me, so I volunteered instead,” said Nancy as she adjusted her gear.

“Nancy, I don’t think this is the right time for you to make a stand. There will be plenty of other missions for you to go on,” said Thomas.

“I do think it is right and I need this mission. I want to pick up where my father left off and this is the best opportunity for me to do so,” said Nancy defiantly.

“Nancy, I won’t approve this. You are in no position to argue otherwise,” said Thomas, leader of the squad she would be assigned to.

“Thomas, I need to be on this mission. It’s what my father would want,” said Nancy.

“Your father would want you to be safe, not running around several hundred miles behind enemy lines on a dangerous mission,” said Darren.

“My father knew the risks I was taking when I was assigned to the other team. And since my team is down for the moment and won’t be back in action for at least another two weeks, I can do this mission. I’m volunteering, but I’m also asking please. Let me do this for my father,” said Nancy.

“I don’t think this is a good idea on so many levels,” said Darren.

“Why? Because I suffered the loss of my Father? Compared to many in the world, I don’t think that is a big deal. I want this mission. I need this mission and you need me on this mission. Sure Johnny can fill in for my Dad, but I know you don’t like having two family members on the same team. Putting me in my Dad’s spot alleviates that problem. I’m ready for this and unless you can think of a really good reason I shouldn’t go, I’m going,” said Nancy adamantly.

“Nancy…” began Thomas when he was interrupted by a voice from behind.

“Thomas, you once told me Mike was one of the most hardheaded, stubborn individuals you had ever come across when he set his mind to something. It’s a trait shared by his firstborn child,” said Candy from behind the group.

“Candy, you all need some time to get this past you. You know I can’t support this,” said Thomas, after swinging around to face Candy and Jill after they had quietly joined the group.

“We talked about this last night and decided it was what is best for our family. Now who are you to argue with what we think is best for our family? Mike left a large hole in your team and you know for a fact you need someone to fill his shoes. Nancy wants to do this and you said a long time ago you would take someone with passion over skill any day of the week. Well, mister, she has both passion and skill and is ready to join this mission,” said Candy.

“Passion can put her or others in harm’s way. You know revenge is a dangerous emotion,” said Darren.

“She’s smart enough to know the difference between revenge and avenging her loved and lost. I can flat guarantee you she can and will outperform each and every one of you out there and bring you all home alive,” said Candy.

“I’m not at all comfortable with this,” said Thomas.

“Neither am I,” said Darren, although relieved his son might not be going.

“Let’s talk privately about this,” suggested Michael.

The three went away for a few minutes discussing the matter with each of them having a heated debate about it in hushed tones. Each one shook his head at several comments that were made until they finally reached an agreement.

“Okay, she’s on board under several conditions. One, you train alongside of Johnny. You will be primary, but he gets just as much training as you do. Two, if any of us detect any kind of problems with you, you are gone. Period, end of statement. Three, the mission we are going on is far behind enemy lines and we cannot be on the mission and have you suffer a breakdown. We will need each and every one on the mission to be one hundred and ten percent ready for action. We will not carry you once we are in the field. If we think for one second you are not mentally there, we call in a chopper to get you or leave you behind and go with seven. Do we have an agreement?” asked Thomas.

“You have my word on it,” she said and almost thanked him. However, her stubborn streak wouldn’t allow it. She knew this was what was right for her life.

And so they began training. The team briefed over the Operations Order once again to make sure everyone knew their specific roles and responsibilities and got down to work. They would be doing a walk through to start with, however, since they were unfamiliar with the layout of the bunker, they would be doing some general training in close quarters battle and practicing on

point shooting techniques as well as some longer range shooting. The secondary team showed up and watched with interest as the group went through the situation as it stood and asked minor questions that benefitted everyone. They continued to walk through and then started moving faster as the teams were already familiar with each other and comfortable knowing where each person would step.

Running through the shoot house, they engaged the threats without ammo before briefing over the plans; another step here out of a possibly kill zone, a flashbang there, frag that point, might think of a breaching charge here, overwatch there instead of here...the list went on as the basic plan was refined to the point of perfection. Darren and Thomas' teams switched out by pairs and fours as each person was drilled into the plan until they knew each other's jobs just as well as the next person. Bill Meyers and Justin Smith looked on with interest as their teams could be called on at any moment to fill in for one of the other teams. Thomas and Darren ran their teams through several times with the frangible ammunition before lunch, confident in their abilities.

When the group broke for lunch, Bill and Justin started running their teams through the training course and emulated the actions of the other teams they had replaced. The primary teams focused on the other survival techniques getting quick refreshers in first aid, land navigation, communications and other critical tasks that would enhance their ability to survive. Being behind the lines so much meant they were shot at quite often and many had Purple Hearts signifying the fact they had taken enemy fire. None were that serious, but it was a constant reminder to learn the first aid so critical to their missions to keep their brothers and sisters alive if it came down to it.

The teams broke away for the afternoon to catch naps and clean weapons before returning to the training site after dark when they would train once again. It started raining that afternoon, but nobody worried too much. There was always a chance it would be raining on their mission and they wanted to be able to perform under any circumstances rather than just when the weather was good. And also since the mission was scheduled to go off at night, they preferred to train in the darkness rather than in daylight.

The teams fell fast asleep when they returned as they took the old soldier's advice of "you get sleep when you can" to heart. Almost everyone fell flat on their face and grabbed a nap before heading back to the ranges that evening. More complicated drills would be run like "okay, Nate just got hit, what do you do now?" and "this room is locked and you are receiving fire from down the hallway" and "a platoon of reinforcements just gathered on the exterior and overran the overwatch, how do you get back out?" The teams would be expected to run it at full speed while overcoming any obstacles thrown their way by different members of the team and the individuals who ran the training site. And throwing live ammo into the mix meant that it would be as real as it could get without having "disposable moving targets" firing back at them.

They began training again after nine o'clock local and the teams again ran through it slow, getting faster and throwing the variations into the mix. The training went well and they continued to work as a team and swapped out with different members taking on different roles and responsibilities. After running through it at least a dozen times, the team backed off and conducted an after action with the big question "what are we missing here?"

For the most part, the team was happy with the training and how it progressed. What they were not happy with was the complete lack of intelligence about the facility itself. There were no reports of the layout of the interior, how many personnel were there, what kind of guard forces were available, what kind of furniture was inside (different kinds of furniture could alter the type of rounds used) were the operators inside armed, where were the major centers of individuals, how much explosives should they carry to destroy the equipment...the questions ran on. No good answers came from any of them since they had limited intelligence about the facility itself. At around 0300, they broke away and headed back to clean up and get some sleep. They would be training again the next evening after a local conditions briefing by Jarvis Werner.

They woke up as they usually did and performed PT on their own that day, again carrying whatever weapons and equipment on the run. Through it all, Nancy was fairly quiet which was very unusual for her. Normally she always wore a smile and had a joke or a comment for her teammates, but not now. Now they saw a grim determination on her face and a permanent scowl. It was very unusual to see the dark cloud covering her cheerful demeanor, but they all understood. And not once did she make a wrong step or show her emotions. She was cold, calculating and precise in her movements. The team did take notice she had carried her father's FNP 45 on her side instead of her usual Taurus PT 24/7. Several wondered why, but figured it might be improper to ask.

They met at Jabba with Jarvis to discuss the local ground environment although Amber had already talked it over with him. The group might have additional questions about the situation just in case the other two had missed them. He was also scheduled to meet with the backup teams the next day as a just in case measure, but the primary teams would be writing up an after action report for them to review in the mean time.

Heather Davis thoughtfully grabbed several different camouflage patterns for him to review as to which one would work best on the ground at that particular location. While they typically dressed in the standard olive drab pattern while in garrison, they knew they needed to ask what the best camouflage scheme would be for use at that location. They had more than enough patterns as the manufacturers from North America would send their latest designs ("it will make you practically invisible!") for the teams to field test. It was like that with most of the gear they had. The Special Operations portions of the FNC got the newest and best items for their missions and sometimes even the "big army" would catch on.

Typically the teams would try the gear out in the surrounding English countryside in field exercises where they could be safely evaluated. Comments ranged from "this sucks and I have no idea why they were thinking it would work" to "this works pretty good, we should send it over to someone else for a second opinion." Since the team had not been on the ground at the target location before, they would need a better set of eyes looking over what camouflage scheme would work best at that location.

"Master Sergeant Werner, thank you for taking the time with us. We really appreciate it," said Thomas as they locked the intelligence facility.

“It is nothing, *Herr Major*. Anything that helps my family to live free again I will gladly do,” said Jarvis.

“You understand what is said here needs to stay here. Our mission is important and we need to be discrete about what we are doing. *Verstehen?*” asked Thomas.

“Discrete?” asked Jarvis, unsure of the English word.

Amber put the German accent on the word which in fact was very close to English. He immediately understood and agreed. “*Genau*, it will be as you say it is.”

“Thank you. Now you have already briefed some of our team on the ground conditions at the target, but we would like to hear for all of us,” said Thomas.

Jarvis went through his speech once again about the area surrounding the target location. Several times Amber or Nate jumped in to assist with the translation with Jarvis learning some new English words in the process. It was a detailed briefing and the team learned a lot from Jarvis about the ground level.

“What about the people in the area?” asked Martin.

“The people are good and loyal to the cause of freedom. Mainly simple farmers and the like. When the NATO base closed there, many people moved away, but the area is still largely a farm region,” said Jarvis.

“And since the IU moved in? Have attitudes changed?” asked Scott.

“*Nein*, one thing to remember about Germans, we are very much care for our country. I do not know how to translate this from *Deutsch*, but we love our country first,” said Jarvis.

“Patriotic, will they help us if we need it?” asked Michael.

“Almost certainly. Germans want the invaders from the east gone. Many...Amber, *Deutsch Freiheitskaempfer?*” asked Jarvis.

Amber and Nate took a moment to think about the word and the translation. “German freedom fighters? Underground resistance is what I think it means,” said Nate.

“Probably, *Freiheits* equals freedom and *Kaempfer* is fighter or warrior. Yeah, probably the German resistance,” concurred Amber.

“Not soldiers, not civilians, *Parteigänger, verstehen?*” asked Jarvis.

“Partisan, yes the German freedom fighters...underground resistance,” said Rob Davis.

“And about them?” asked Michael.

“They fight the IU all the time, making raids and destroying vehicles. Some attacks against the *Flugplätze* there, but they are well defended,” said Jarvis.

“Flug...what?” asked Greg.

“Airfields, probably Spangdahlem and Bitburg,” said Nate.

“How many are in these groups?” asked Brian.

“Sometimes just four or five, sometimes as many as twenty or thirty,” said Jarvis.

“Are they friendly towards Americans and will they work with us?” asked Frank.

“*Jawohl*, anyone who can help them defeat the IU is a friend. You might need to bring a...gift? A gift to help them out,” said Jarvis.

“A gift?” asked Heather Davis.

“I think he means supplies or something that will help them out. I’m sure we can accommodate that kind of request. What kind of supplies might they need?” asked Jeremy, one of the supply individuals for the teams.

“Explosives, weapons, ammunition, food, clothing, radios, that kind of items. They are not...picky I believe is the English word when it comes to gifts falling from the skies,” said Jarvis.

“We need to contact our dear Colonel and find out if he had made contact with any of the groups there yet,” said Thomas. Darren took the cue and walked to the secure phone to make the call to their superior. The rest of the group learned a little more about the local area around the base, the terrain and how the area was made up of many small towns rather than larger cities.

“And it is dense woods nearby the target location?” asked Heather.

“*Ja*, the woods used to be cleared of...I do not know the English word, bushes and things on the ground by the government leaving only the trees standing, but since *Das Niedergang*, it has not been done. There will be bushes and small trees growing on the ground,” said Jarvis.

“I think he means undergrowth. What kind of camouflage works best in that location?” asked Heather.

“What I am wearing works okay for hiding,” said Jarvis, pointing at the Multicam uniform he was wearing. “The old American Army and Air Force uniforms do not work as well at all. The old green and brown ones, the BDU I think, work sometimes.”

“Will any of these work better?” asked Heather, fetching the uniform tops out of her bag.

“Fashion show time!” laughed Martin.

The group, with the exception of Nancy, laughed along with the joke as Heather handed over the uniform tops. Jarvis looked at each in turn, separating them out in two piles. “The area is much *braun und dunkelgrün*, I mean brown and dark green, at this time in year. It is not yet spring and the leaves are covering all new plants. This one would work well as will this one,” he said pointing at a digital version of the Multicam and another pattern which was predominately browns and darker greens with a few swatches of gray and spots of black. Pulling them off to the side, he pointed at the three remaining uniforms, a digital BDU type, a digital tiger stripe and one with more greens in it for heavily vegetated areas. “These three I do not think will work that well.”

“Okay, so Multicam, Digi-emcam (Digital Multicam) or that new one by United Dynamics, what was it they called it? Stark? Of the three, which one would work the best?” asked Thomas.

“This one,” he said pointing at the Digi-emcam and moving to the Stark pattern. “*Und* this one.”

“Why two?” asked Frank.

“This one would work well in the woods *und* this one would work best in open fields,” said Jarvis. “Both would work well in both places, but one would work better than the other.”

“We have only tested the Stark pattern once out here, boss,” said Willy Perez.

“And if I recall it did okay,” said Greg.

“But it contrasted with the local environment too much around here to be completely effective. It blended in okay, but the browns showed out too much. Maybe it is different on the continent,” said Willy.

“So split the difference, wear one, carry another in case the situation changes or we find the other doesn’t blend in well,” suggested Rick.

“Sounds like a plan. Okay, camouflage is covered. Heather, thank you for providing that little fashion show. What else are we missing about the target location?” asked Thomas.

Jarvis continued to tell them about the local area and the towns nearby, assisted by the careful translation of Amber and Nate. While their linguistic skills would prove priceless on the mission, the rest of the group would still carry “pointy-talkies” with simple phrases for the local population.

“How well patrolled is this area?” asked Scott.

“This area was a popular walking spot for many before *Das Niedergang*, so there were many trails in the woods. I do not know how many are patrolled by the IU now, but I would think

some are. The *Deutsche Freiheitskämpfer* are very dangerous in the woods and I would think the IU does not go out in few numbers. Maybe squad or platoon strength,” said Jarvis.

Darren returned with news from their headquarters. “Good news, they made contact with the German Resistance in a place called Speicher. They have been passed a message and will be waiting on our arrival when we decide on a drop zone. Apparently we are taking in some cargo as well, the gifts suggested by our friend here. The Colonel confirmed we will be parachuting instead of going by helo, so everyone needs to get their gear ready for airborne insertion.”

“What kind of gifts?” asked Jeremy.

“The kind that goes boom along with some that plug holes in the body. Apparently we are also taking in a load of cigarettes as that was the only thing they asked for,” laughed Darren. “They also have a challenge and password passed along as well. Right up your alley, Tom.”

“Is there anything else we can think of we are missing?” asked Thomas.

“Drop zone?” asked Michael.

“Jarvis, you know this area from the ground level. Our contacts say make a drop here, between Daufenbach and Hosten. Bring up the sat photo of the DZ and let our friend see it and let us know what he thinks,” said Darren.

The satellite photo was brought up of the area designated by the German underground for the teams to drop into. Looking at the photo almost a week old, it showed a large sloping field which was probably a farm during spring and summer. With the exception of the lack of cover, it was ideal for their purpose.

“Looks a little too close to the base if you ask me,” observed Brian.

“Apparently there are a few raids scheduled around this time to include a wild weasel raid on the locations around here. That should take care of the anti-aircraft part of it. Plus, normal operations for the IU are to duck and cover during air raids. Nobody moves until it is all over,” said Darren. “And they specifically mentioned this location as being close to their base of operations. There is an alternate site they identified here east of Preist.”

“If they say this is best, I guess we can’t argue with that,” said Rick.

“These are two of the seven drop zones the group has used when getting supplies in an airdrop. They are a careful bunch moving them around,” said Darren.

“Okay, so that is settled, anything else?” asked Thomas.

The group went round the table asking different questions about the mission to the rest of the team as well as Jarvis. When it was all said and done, they were confident everything had been answered. Thomas was the last to brief.

“Let’s go through the OPOD one last time just so we are clear. Situation is unchanged; mission is unchanged with the exception of friendly forces now located at or near the town of Speicher. Execution is unchanged but will change with go time to be announced when we get airflow. Service and support is unchanged and command and signal is unchanged, but let’s go through the team alignment just in case.”

“Alpha Team will consist of me as team leader, Amber as grenadier, Greg with the Ultimax light machine gun, and Brian as the designated marksman carrying his 7.62 rifle.”

“Bravo Team will consist of Michael as team leader, Nate as grenadier, Willy with the H and K general purpose machine gun, and Nancy as the designated marksman. Plan on having an additional long range rifle to hump in there Nancy, we might need the distance. Also, Willy, plan on taking a PDW or a sub gun for close quarters.”

“Charlie Team will be Darren as team leader and second in charge of the mission. Frank fills in as sniper as usual. Jeremy, you fill in as the other light machine gunner with your Ultimax and Martin, you go as grenadier.”

“Last but not least, Delta Team with Rick as team leader, Scott as grenadier, Heather as designated marksman and Rob as the other machine gunner. Just like Willy, plan on taking a PDW for close quarters just in case.”

“Jarvis, I hate to do this, but you will be confined to base while we are off on the mission. Knowing what you know can be dangerous to our safety if word gets out about what we are doing. You will still be able to move around base, but you cannot have contact outside of this base until we have returned. Your unit has been contacted and knows you will not be returning for some time. Is there anything else?”

Nobody answered as all their questions had been answered.

“Let’s go get some.”

CHAPTER 7 - INSERTION

Date/Time: 11 March/1728

Location: RAF Bassingbourn, Cambridgeshire County, Great Britain

The teams continued their training throughout the next two days prior to the scheduled departure time. Mainly it consisted of going over items they already were familiar with, but brushed up on one last time as a matter of course. They perused additional intelligence documents not only from the target location, but for a twenty, fifty and a hundred mile radius eventually. Anything within that area could and would be considered a threat to the teams and additional plans could be made. What worried them the most was the armored battalion stationed in Trier and the mechanized infantry battalions in Daun and Wittlich. While their mission would hopefully end before those three forces could be brought to bear, it did give everyone pause for thought. But additionally, platoon and company sized elements of infantry were spread out in the area, coming close to a light division sized formation within that one hundred mile radius. Also not counted in were the infantry forces detailed to guard the air bases at Bitburg and Spangdahlem. They would have to be very sneaky indeed to pull this one off.

In the barracks, everyone was busy snoozing, preparing last minute items for the mission or taking care of personal matters. Thomas had already written his “death letter” to Sharon just as he always did before a dangerous mission. Since they were getting tagged for more missions lately, it was hard to find someone to promise to deliver it. But Stephen Garcia had been injured recently on a training jump and he would not be able to go back out for a couple of weeks. Hopefully long enough to finish out this mission.

But now, twelve hours prior to the mission, they started focusing on the task at hand and getting their game face on. Amber was on her bunk next to Thomas, listening to something her husband had sent her on her MP3 player on tiny speakers and writing in her diary. It was something he hadn’t heard her listen to before and commented so.

“I don’t know. Heath just lumped a lot of stuff onto this before mailing it and didn’t think to add the tags onto it. They are talented; nice singing voices,” said Amber.

“Yeah,” said Thomas as he listened to the remainder of the song and Amber started it once again. “How is Heath doing?”

“Recovering okay. It’s going to take some time, but they have him teaching at the mountain survival school near Leadville. He’s been trying to get back at it, but anything more than daily tasks seem to aggravate the injury more,” she said. Heath Bates had been injured badly on a mission when a mortar round had hit near his position. They had managed to stabilize him on scene and get a medevac chopper on scene, but major surgery was needed and even longer rehabilitation. He was back in Colorado now, but had been put back on light duty instructing at one of the specialized schools for the FNC armed forces.

The song completed its turn and went on to another band and another song, completely different from what had been on before. “Ever wonder what happened to some people in the world?” asked Amber.

“What do you mean?” asked Thomas.

“I mean since the Fall and the war. What has happened to some people? Just like those singers on that last song. What happened to them?” asked Amber.

“I think about that from time to time. I mean, some you know made it through okay, others just disappeared. Yeah, it does make one think about what happened,” said Thomas.

And it was true, so many lives lost from the Fall and the War it was mind blowing, but quite a few that managed to survive. There was even a group of actors and actresses from Hollywood that managed to survive. A few of their number had been preparing for years under the radar and banded together during the Fall. While they had not been in Hollywood at the time (as it had been heavily damaged during the nuclear strike and burned to the ground during the rioting afterwards) they had gone to their retreats in North California and survived it all. While they had been famous before, they now were ordinary people and acted as such as well. But millions more had perished and probably more so by the time the war was over.

“Ready for dinner?” asked Thomas as the thoughts would consume them both if they let them go on.

“What are they serving?” asked Amber.

“Your guess is as good as mine, but you know you need it. Rations for the foreseeable future after this,” said Thomas, getting his web gear on and grabbing his carbine.

“I think I’ll pass and nibble on something here,” she said, turning her attention back to the diary.

“Come on trooper, you know it’s better to go out on a full stomach, even though it might not be the best,” said Thomas, tugging at her pant leg.

“Sometimes I wonder if starving might not be the better choice between eating in that chow hall and not,” said Amber.

“Might not be a bad idea to think about, but we need you up and alert for this mission. Come on princess, let’s get something to eat,” said Thomas.

Amber grumbled about and put her things back in the footlocker at the base of her bunk, grabbing her weapons as well. Others joined them as they saw it was time for dinner prior to getting one last shower and gearing up for the mission. After walking the short distance to the chow hall, they were in for a surprise.

“Lasagna! My favorite!” exclaimed Amber as she saw the menu on the board outside the chow hall. “And real garlic bread!”

“Aren’t you glad I forced you to come?” asked Thomas.

“Thanks Tom, you were right this one time,” she laughed and grabbed one of the metal trays from the head of the line along with the silverware. After reaching the worker serving the main course, she was disappointed in the portion size. “That’s all?”

“Ma’am, we have a bunch of people to serve and we need to make sure everyone gets some,” said the man behind the table.

“Come on, just a little more. Please?” she asked while batting her eyes and giving a coquettish smile.

Groans and rolling eyes behind her followed as the rest of her team knew the game. But the young man behind the line was just that, young at nineteen years old and filled with a young man’s emotions and hormones. And Amber was still beautiful even wearing the baggy uniform and the rain coat. “I really shouldn’t...” he started to say and plopped another half a serving on her tray and gave a blush filled smile back. She grinned and gave him a wink for his troubles.

“I guess batting my eyes at you and flirting probably won’t get me more than what you are planning on giving me?” asked Greg with a scowl.

“Chief! I uhh-” he managed to say before he was cut off by the notoriously by the book Chief Master Sergeant Greg Henry.

“Shut it troop and just shovel it on my plate,” said Greg with another scowl.

The young man dutifully complied and continued to serve the people in line, although more mindful of who was around while he did so.

“Amber, you are horrible. I can’t believe what you did to that poor young man, invoking the wrath of the mean old Chief Henry,” laughed Brian when he got to the table.

“You all don’t complain about it when I do it to get supplies or vehicles or the mail on time or any number of other things,” she said in defense. “And it IS good lasagna.”

The group laughed and knew it was true. When they came up on a gruff supply sergeant or a by the books range master, Amber was often sent in to soften the male in question up. And more often than not, it worked like a charm. It was a minor abuse of her looks, but whatever gave the team the advantage they would go with. The dinner continued with small talk and nothing of the mission. It was on a need to know basis and some of those around didn’t have a need to know. Amber got up to return to the line for seconds.

“You probably don’t want to do that Amber. It could be a rough flight in,” warned Thomas.

“It’ll be okay, there’s enough time to get another portion. We don’t get this that often,” she said and returned to the line.

“Can’t say I didn’t warn her,” said Thomas as the group laughed.

The rest of dinner passed as this would be one of the last times they would be able to relax for a while. They went back to the barracks in twos and threes and started getting ready for the mission at hand. While they were preparing, Thomas was approached by Jarvis.

“*Herr Major*, I have a request of you do not mind,” said Jarvis, standing straight as he always did.

“Yes of course,” said Thomas as he pulled the draw string on his pack and cinched it up.

“I know you are going close to my home and will be meeting the *Freiheitskaempfer* when you get there. I ask you take a letter for them to deliver to my parents please,” said Jarvis, handing over an unsealed envelope.

“Are you sure they will know where to look?” asked Thomas, seeing the blank envelope.

“I will give you the address and their names. For their safety I ask you memorize it and pass the information along,” said Jarvis.

“We can do that, but we will have to censor the letter first,” said Thomas.

“This I understand. I only make this request because I do not know if my other letters have reached my home,” said Jarvis.

“It is not a problem. And this is the least we can do for your help in preparing us for this mission,” said Thomas, taking the letter and handing it over to Amber for translation.

“I’ll do it right now so you can see what we will take out,” said Amber, starting to read the letter hand written in German.

After reading it twice, she showed him two areas she needed to mark out. He understood and marked them out himself with the marker she provided. Afterwards, the letter would be run through a copy machine erasing any trace of the original markings on the paper. She walked with him to a nearby building where she ran it through and then sealed the envelope. He wrote down his parent’s address in Wittlich or the last place he knew they lived. She promised him they would pass the letter along to the *Freiheitskaempfer* when they met up and have them deliver it.

After returning and grabbing a shower, the team rapidly geared up for the mission, finishing last minute packing and grabbing items they felt might be useful on the mission. Once they were content with their gear, they rucked up and headed for the Air Transport Operations Center, or

ATOC, to make contact with the Air Force individual in charge of their transport that evening. Thomas and Darren made contact with him just as an AFNAS C-130J aircraft landed and taxied towards the loading ramp.

“Right on time Major. That’s your ride coming in right now,” he said as he pointed at the darker gray aircraft.

It appeared to be an ordinary C-130 until the two saw the tail of the aircraft denoting it as the squadron commander’s personal bird as well as the italics “Special” under the tail markings as well as the Viking *Knarr* ship emblem near the nose of the aircraft with the stylized dragon’s head at the front of the boat. This emblem more than anything denoted a unit that knew their business as it was a special insignia given by SOF units to aircrews that showed fearlessness while transporting teams behind the lines.

They also saw repair marks where the aircraft had taken fire at some point and been repaired without being repainted. The unit, the AFNAS 132nd Airlift Squadron (Special) wasn’t specifically a Special Operations Unit, but had the training to perform as such and it looked like they had at a few points in time. Thomas knew several teams had been transported on that unit’s aircraft and their rides had always gotten them there on time and on target.

“And the cargo we are taking with us?” asked Thomas.

“Those three wood pallets right there,” said the Tech Sergeant. “All packed with chutes ready to go.”

“Anything else?” asked Darren.

“Nothing they have told me, but I don’t always get the information down here in the trenches,” said the Tech Sergeant.

“Weather over the DZ?” asked Thomas. They had received a weather briefing already, but up to date weather was critical to the mission and especially an airborne drop. And on the European mainland where the weather changed unpredictably it was even more critical.

“Let’s take a look here...partly cloudy...winds out of the southwest at sustained eight knots; ground temp is...forty three degrees Fahrenheit currently. Temp will drop overnight down to about thirty or so with tomorrow being party cloudy with a chance of rain or snow and a high of about thirty-five,” said the Tech Sergeant as he consulted the computer for the accurate weather forecast.

“Long range forecast?” asked Darren.

“Five to ten day forecast shows much the same as it has been. Partly cloudy to complete overcast with rain or snow. Temperatures probably won’t get above forty-five to fifty over the next ten days or so the forecasters with their crystal balls are saying,” said the Tech Sergeant. The forecasters had a hard time predicting the weather to more than fifteen minutes. Some

things had changed since the Fall, but others stayed the same. But the bad weather forecast might have been a problem for some.

But it didn't bother either of the two. Bad weather in the forecast was better for the teams as they preferred it. Bad weather meant the enemy wouldn't be as alert and not as apt to be doing the proper patrols. Bad weather meant they would probably be inside warming up rather than out and about where they could detect the teams. Bad weather was their ally rather than a foe. And while it would hamper their efforts slightly, it was an obstacle they could and would overcome.

After receiving the last minute briefing, Thomas and Darren went out to meet the aircrew and saw more pallets being delivered for a drop. "What's all this?" asked Darren.

"The powers that be decided your team wasn't the only thing we would be delivering tonight. We have an additional three drops scheduled along with your team. You guys are first, but after that we get to earn our hazardous duty pay and do another three drops to the resistance," said the loadmaster, an older gentleman which looked like he was not to be trifled with.

"We are still on schedule though?" asked Thomas.

"Just getting refueled, box lunches and the cargo strapped in and we should be good to go," said the loadmaster.

"Sounds like a plan. ETA?" asked Thomas.

"'Bout an hour or so. You guys know where the chow hall is?" asked the loadmaster.

"Over that way about three hundred yards or so. Can't miss it," said Thomas as he pointed in the general direction of the facility.

The loadmaster talked with the Flight Engineer and he went to pick up the meals for the crew. The remainder of the crew went about their duties of packing the aircraft, refueling or getting the up to the minute weather data. The pilot, a Lieutenant Colonel, singled out Thomas and Darren and made contact with them.

"Drop zone has changed. Received word right before we landed that you are going to the alternate D-Z near Preist. Won't be any longer as the drop zones are close enough as it is," said the pilot.

"They say why?" asked Thomas.

"Nope, just told us we wouldn't be dropping where we planned. We've already recomputed and taken the new zone into account. It's only a few miles from the first one so it's not a big deal," said the pilot.

"And the other drops?" asked Thomas.

“Won’t affect your team as we have you first on the list. You don’t need to know where else we are heading,” said the pilot.

“Understood, although what’s our infiltration route? I want to inform our team,” said Darren.

“Over Belgium and into Germany from there. Alternate route takes us over France and through Luxemburg,” said the pilot.

“Sounds like a plan. When do we board?” asked Thomas.

“I’ll have the loadmaster come collect you when we are ready. Just stand by in the ATOC for now,” said the pilot as he went off to assist his crew.

Thomas and Darren informed the team about the new destination and got ready to get underway. Last minute checks were conducted and camouflage applied. Buddies gathered up and helped with spots that might have been missed. Weapons were checked, rechecked and checked once again before being put into their protective cases for transport. Sidearms would be readily available if they came under fire at the drop zones, but would only be used to fight their way to the various rifles and carbines.

In the final moments before boarding, they received a visit from the chaplain as they usually did. His words of inspiration always came at a good time and he spoke of the family of service and doing one’s job for a higher calling. He ended the small inspirational speech with a scripture from 1 Corinthians “Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be men of courage; be strong.” It was pretty good advice for the group and they would remember those words.

Everything was good to go and the time passed by quickly enough as they grabbed their gear, parachutes and reserve chutes and climbed on board. The loadmaster handed out air sickness bags as they boarded and set their gear where it would be somewhat out of the way. The C-130 was nowhere near filled, but the large packs they had stowed on the deck made walking around a little harder.

Thomas looked over at Nancy sitting near her partner Michael. She had the same expressionless look she had the entire time through training. Thomas second guessed the decision to bring her along for the hundredth time, but knew it was too late to change that now. Her conduct so far was fine and her tactics sound. But she wasn’t the same Nancy they all knew. They had not seen her smile at all during the preparation for the mission, even when something was laughed at by the teams. She was as serious as they had ever seen her before.

She must have felt Thomas staring at her and looked his way. He didn’t avert his gaze as some might have and gave her a look of “everything okay?” She did nothing more than give him a thumbs up and went back to trying to get comfortable in the web seating of the aircraft.

The take off went as planned and the aircraft rose to a cruising altitude and headed towards the North Sea where it would begin its journey southward towards the mainland. In short order, they dropped to a bumpy nap of the earth flight skimming the wave tops towards their objective.

“Lantern 3, you see that triple A site?” asked the pilot of the F/A-18G aircraft as he maneuvered out of range of the 57mm anti aircraft guns.

“Roger lead, I’m on it!” radioed the aircraft following immediately behind the leader as they played their dangerous game of cat and mouse with the anti aircraft defenses of the local airfields.

The lead aircraft received a signal it had been locked onto by a SAM site and immediately targeted an AGM-88E missile at the transmitter. He fired just as two SAMs headed his way.

“LEAD! JINK RIGHT AND DROP CHAFF! TWO MISSILES INCOMING FROM YOUR TWO O’CLOCK!” radioed his wingman.

The lead aircraft popped up and down as he put his nose towards the incoming missiles. He knew they moved fast, but being able to see them meant he would have a better chance of avoiding them. The chaff was dispensed as he made a sharp turn when he eyeballed the missiles. Both went after the decoys and the HARM hit the radar transmitting.

Cluster bombs destroyed the offending 57mm AAA that had opened fire on the aircraft as the aircraft looked for more targets.

The four aircraft continued to wreak havoc on the defenses around the area just as the Texan F-15G aircraft started dropping their bomb loads and launching their missiles onto the airfield at Spangdahlem. Overhead, three flights of aircraft, two F-16 flights and one F-20 flight tangled with the MiGs sent up by the IU prior to the raid. But also present were IU Eurofighter Typhoons, brought back into production following the invasion of Europe as a front line fighter for the Air Forces. The factory had been moved underground like many of the industries during World War II and the FNC had a hard time locating it and destroying it. The radio calls told the story.

“Cougar 3, break right! Break right! Typhoon coming around to your six,” said a pilot.

“I can’t see him! Get him off me!” radioed the pilot under attack.

“Hard right! I’m engaged!” radioed another.

“Two MiGs going up high! Panther 3 and 4 engage!” said a flight leader.

“Rhino flight! Be advised, some MiGs broke through the CAP and are inbound towards you from your eight o’clock!” radioed another to the inbound Texan fighters. “Sentinel, be advised, we need some help up here!”

The scene repeated itself to the west where more fighters and fighter-bombers were attacking Bitburg Air Base and at other airfields around the area. On board Sentinel, the E-11A AWACS aircraft based on the Boeing 767 design, battle management technicians called for additional fighters to assist the fighters as well as directing the fighter-bombers and wild weasel aircraft to engage once their missions were complete. The Senior Controller in the back directed the fighters to move east and north away from the air base.

“As soon as they are clear, let ‘Country Boy’ know he is clear to proceed with his drop. We’ll only have a short window here,” said the Senior Controller overlooking the radar scope and watching the lone C-130 move towards the drop zone for the special mission. It was unusual for so much support for a single raid, but the Colonel had his orders.

Thomas and his team were now clear to drop onto the zone designated by the German resistance hopefully without fear of attack by enemy fighters or anti aircraft weapons.

CHAPTER 8 – IN PLACE

Date/Time: 12 March/0212

Location: Northeast of Preist, Occupied Germany

Thomas could see the ground rushing up at him and pulled down on the risers of the parachute to slow his decent even more and allow him to come in for a controlled landing. Hopefully would be the operative word used here as many can tell you the best laid plans in parachuting normally go astray. However, he cut the pack away from the front of his body within five feet of the ground and was able to land on his feet without falling over. It was not normal practice, releasing the gear so close, but they were not normal troops. He wanted his weapons and equipment immediately available in case he needed it right off.

He heard Amber land to his left, far less controlled than his was. She hated parachuting more than anything but only because of the landing. She never could get the landing right even after being instructed by almost everyone at the airborne school. However, she was never seriously injured, so eventually they just gave up and called it a new technique, the “Amber Landing” which they continued to use to this day in that school for students which just couldn’t get the landing down right. It was a small way for her to live on in infamy.

Thomas quickly pulled his pistol from the holster and moved towards his ruck and his carbine, planning on getting it ready for action. More bombs were heard exploding in the distance at one of the two nearby air bases and the firecracker sound of cluster munitions could be heard between the deeper booms of the larger bombs. He could hear the remainder of the team continuing to land one by one between the detonations as he reached his gear and grabbed at the case. He had grabbed the zipper for the case when a voice to his rear caught his attention.

“Hey, anyone here from Wisconsin?” said the voice.

Thomas immediately turned and pointed his pistol at the voice. Just enough moonlight was visible to see the man was not dressed in an IU uniform. He was armed however, with the AKM slung across his back and the rag tag web gear hanging loosely on his body.

“Doubt there’s that many ‘cheese heads’ around here,” said Thomas, disguising the challenge phrase in the sentence.

“Oh, that’s too bad. I grew up partly in Wisconsin. I was hoping for a fellow Packers fan,” said the voice with a slightest German accent.

“In case you missed it, ‘cheese head,’ and what’s your reply?” requested Thomas.

“You are a special forces unit from the FNC dropped here to get our help in destroying a bunker near here,” said the individual before he added a chilling twist. “Trust me, if we wanted you dead, you would be dead already.”

“I don’t know about that,” said Thomas.

“But I do. Jonas?” said the voice as Thomas heard the distinctive sound of an AK safety being removed from behind him.

“Yeah, two of you and two of us. Both of you have weapons pointed at you and only one at us. He challenged you, do be so kind to give up the password,” said Amber from behind the other man as the distinctive sound of an M-4 style safety was heard clicking over to Burst.

“Oh, we aren’t the only two around,” said the voice and turned partially and flashed a pen light three times at the nearby tree line. At least thirty lights flashed back twice. “So you can see you are covered.

“Maybe so, but you are in a curious position. I challenged you; you have failed to give me the correct response. Tell me why I don’t shoot you right now?” said Thomas.

“It’s very hard for me to give the response,” said the voice.

“Make it easy,” said Thomas again.

The individual took a deep breath in before giving the correct reply to the challenge. “Steelers rule.”

“Now was that so bad?” asked Thomas.

“For a Green Bay fan? You have no idea,” said the voice as Thomas holstered his pistol and stood up to greet the man. “The only thing that might have been worse was saying the Bears were the greatest.”

“Warbucks,” said Thomas, giving his personal call sign instead of his name. It was a throwback to his former stature and amount of money he once had. Each and every person got to have a call sign, but they didn’t get to pick it and typically it was something they didn’t care for, but went along with it out of good humor.

“Kind of an odd name. I’m Erik Weber, leader of the Speicher resistance. Pleased to meet you,” said the man as he walked over to shake hands with Thomas.

“It’s better that you don’t know my real name. Let me count noses and get back to you,” said Thomas as he met with his team leaders. Other than a few bumps and bruises, everyone made it through the jump okay. Darren (Snoopy), Michael (Token) and Rick (Badaa or Big Dumb Animal) all reported everyone was okay and preparing to move. After setting out all around security Thomas returned to Weber. “You have people that can be used to transport the supplies?”

“We have people and animals ready to move them,” said Erik as he flashed his penlight at the tree line five times. Others started to move into the clearing, some leading cattle to help haul the supplies to wherever they were going...which brought up a good point.

“Where are we heading to?” asked Thomas.

“To our headquarters not far from here. It’s safe where we are going, but we need to act quickly. The IU will be back out not long after your attacks are finished,” said Weber as he spoke in German commands to the gathering individuals. Some tried to take the teams packs, but were politely turned down. The remainder of the gear was quickly picked up and either packed on the cows or carried between two people.

“Badaa, you and your team take rear security. Have Trouble (Heather Davis) and Rocky (Rob Davis) keep an eye out to see if anyone is following us,” said Thomas to Rick as they prepared to get underway.

“You and your people have some strange names,” observed Erik as they got ready to move towards the bunker where their group would be.

“Again, better that you don’t know who we are exactly in case something was to happen and one of you were captured,” said Thomas.

“Right, let’s be on our way then,” said Erik as he told the group in German to start moving. Those with the cattle had already done so.

Lucky for the group it wasn’t that far a walk to the bunker. The immediately went into the woods near the drop zone, but came back out after a few minutes of walking. There was a large open field they would need to cross before getting to the area where the bunker was located. More than large, there were several roads that crossed through the open space. But Erik and band of partisans didn’t seem to be that bothered about it and continued moving at the quick pace already set. Moving quickly across the field in the moonlight that faded in and out as the clouds went along, they reached the Kyll River and the woods nearby in record time for having their rucks on.

“Now your people need to trust us. We will be putting one of my men with one of yours as a guide. It is very dangerous here with the sharp cliff near the riverbank,” said Erik.

“Where exactly is your little hideout?” asked Thomas.

“Down near the bottom of the cliff. It’s the safest place there is,” said Erik. “Now be careful and don’t cross over to my left side.”

Thomas did exactly as instructed since he was in no mood to fall off a cliff on this mission. At some points, Erik guided him to the right away from potentially dangerous spots. Eventually they reached a point where a small pathway had been cut into the side of the cliff and lead them to the bottom. They continued on and crossed one more road before doubling back and getting

to the base of the cliff once again. Nothing could be seen in the darkness until an opening appeared in front of them, very well concealed in the side of the hill.

“You are kidding me right?” asked Thomas.

“Nope, this is home,” said Erik.

“You built your bunker in the side of a cliff?” asked Thomas.

“We’ve had a few years to get this done. The bunker was already there, built during the last war. We slightly expanded it,” said Erik.

“And it’s been unnoticed the entire time?” asked Thomas.

“The IU doesn’t come this way frequently and the bunker is only known to the resistance leadership and selected others. We are very well concealed here,” said Erik.

“Planned everything out already?” asked Thomas.

“The equipment from the pallets is being delivered to other locations and will be brought here at different times. With the IU getting back out after the air raid, several head of cattle moving around with boxes strapped onto their backs would draw attention,” said Erik.

“Okay, inside we go then,” said Thomas as he bent over for the small entrance. Concrete lined the inside, but Thomas could see where it was cracked in several locations and looked very well worn. Guides were inside and took the team as they entered and pulled them along with commands in German. Once inside, they saw how large the shelter was or how big they had made it. The ceiling was about six and a half feet in most places and other rooms that had been cut into the ground were seen. All in all, it was an impressive works.

“How long has this been here?” asked Frank, better known as “Demo” now. The name came from a time they had been practicing with explosives and he had used more than enough on the simple exercise. The training guideline stated to use one pound of explosive and he had misread the report and used ten pounds instead, causing a great alarm to go off across the base.

“It was built during the last war,” said another member of Erik’s group, a short but stout man named Markus Schneider who carried a PKM machine gun like it was a toy. His English wasn’t the best, but only because he hadn’t practiced it in such a long time.

“Impressive,” was all Frank could say as they were led into a room off to the left.

“This is where you will stay,” said Markus as he motioned with his hand as the others came tromping in and shed their packs.

“Well, it ain’t the Hyatt, but it will do,” said Nate Clark, now being called “Baldy.”

“Better that sleeping in that cow barn we were in during the invasion of Scotland,” laughed Brian, call sign “Tattoo.” They had seen the rose he had permanently affixed to his left arm during training and never let him live it down, even though his wife had a matching one on her ankle.

After all sixteen individuals made it inside; they found it would be fairly cramped. Thomas and Darren decided it might be best if half of them were in another room. They walked outside the room now aided by oil lamps at a low setting and found Erik speaking in German to his group.

“Hey boss, we need some additional room if you don’t mind,” said Darren.

“Of course. That room is just for storing your gear and sleeping arrangements have been made in other rooms,” said Erik as one of his team brought in a box with a huge smile and an excited utterance in German.

Thomas and Darren followed the two back deeper into the bunker and found a larger briefing room and a small wood stove. The pipe led into the ceiling and off into places unknown.

“Isn’t it kind of dangerous to have a wood fire down here?” asked Darren.

“The chimney goes up through the side of the hill and through several filters before exiting well away from here. The German engineers that put this place in during the last war saw to it this place was heated very well and no sign of smoke would emerge from the ground. Actually, this was the headquarters for a division involved in the Battle of the Bulge during the last war,” said Erik as he watched his group open the cardboard box and yank out the contents. Smiles all around the room were had as the first carton of cigarettes was opened and passed around.

“You see, we don’t get cigarettes around here except from the black market. Only the IU has tobacco and it’s not that good,” explained Erik as at least half his group lit up a cancer stick.

“Right, so what’s the plan here boss?” asked Darren.

“We will wait until tomorrow to show your people the site. I’m sorry, but we will have to walk in from here and it’s a good way away. We have no vehicles and any fuel is in short supply. I know your people will want to keep a watch with mine so let me know who it is and we can pair them up with my guards. Tomorrow afternoon I will have four of my men show your people where the site is and let them see for themselves,” said Erik as he politely declined a cigarette offered by one of his team.

“Where are we exactly?” asked Thomas as he pulled his map out. His GPS wasn’t functioning this far underground and he had not taken a last position check before entering.

Erik looked over the map and found several known locations. “We are here,” he said pointing at the map with the tip of a pen. “And the communications bunker is here,” he said pointing at another location.

“Right where Mike said it probably was,” observed Thomas.

“That’s a good walk. At least a day’s worth if not more. Add in the recon of the area and it goes even more. Twenty-four hours at least to reach the site and recon, not even mentioning the walk back. Is there some place closer we can go before attacking this installation?” asked Darren.

Erik thought about it for a moment before answering. “*Ja*, there is a...safe house? Is that the term you use? A safe house in Zemmer we can use for some of your men to stay before going to the bunker.”

“Is it reliable?” asked Thomas.

“It is the cousin of one of my people,” said Erik.

“Family counts. Tomorrow then?” asked Thomas.

“*Ja*, tomorrow, or shall I say this afternoon we will send your team away,” said Erik.

“We will want to look over the area before going in. Snoopy, you and your team goes,” said Thomas.

“Just the four of us. Me, Demo, Irish (Jeremy) and Solo (Martin),” said Darren.

“Works for me, but make sure Solo doesn’t get lost again,” laughed Thomas, referring to the uncanny ability for Martin Watkins to get lost while on patrol. While it had nothing to do with his call sign, it was said he could get lost with a GPS, two compasses and a guide dog. “Who’s got first watch?”

“We will go in pairs starting with my team and move on down the line. Two hours tops and not putting your team in the mix. You guys need your rest for that walk,” said Thomas.

“Sounds good to me. Anything else?” asked Darren.

“No, not for the moment. Was there anything for us before we get some rest?” asked Thomas to Erik.

“No, nothing I can think of. I will send out a runner to alert the residents of the safe house in a few hours. We all could use some sleep,” yawned Erik.

Thomas returned to the room where the team was gathered with Erik and informed them they would be staying in two separate rooms and the batting order for the watch schedule. “Token, your team and mine will take the other room. Snoopy and Badaa will take this one. Glamour (Amber) and I will take first watch, followed by Grumpy (Greg) and Tattoo and on to Token’s team. I’ll let him work out the watch schedule, but Snoopy’s team is exempt. They are heading out for an onsite recon tomorrow. Any questions?” asked Thomas.

Nobody had anything to add and Erik showed them the other room where they would be bedding down. Some of his team were already in the cots and offered their use to the team, but were politely refused. The teams spread out the offered blankets on top of their sleeping pads and grabbed a ration to eat. They heated them up in a pot of water on the top of the small woodstove and ate quickly before getting to sleep. And they would need sleep for the coming days.

CHAPTER 9 – AND SO IT BEGINS

Date/Time: 12 March/1229

Location: German Resistance Bunker, Near Speicher, Occupied Germany

Darren had woken up earlier than the rest of the group and wandered around the remainder of the bunker, looking over the operation of the resistance group. He found the two team members on guard, Heather and Rob Davis near the entrance trying to stay warm by being under their poncho liners together. Unusual as siblings were often not allowed to serve on the same teams, much less be partnered up, Thomas had brought them both on board since they were absent the normal sibling rivalry (at least on missions and when it counted) and were highly efficient in their jobs. When working together they represented a dynamic team which fought hard, but also fought smart. Darren dismissed them to get some sleep and change up the normal pattern of the guard rotation slightly.

The weather patterns predicted by the forecasters in England had apparently been spot on and moved into the local area since they had been there. He wandered to the front “door” of the bunker where he was granted permission to peek through the vision blocks of the entrance outside. While somewhat cloudy and blurry, Darren could see some snow falling near the entrance but not sticking except in a few places. It certainly looked gloomy outside, but again, they could and would use this to their advantage.

Darren took a look around the rest of the shelter and was highly impressed by the organization of the group as well as the thoughtful details they put into the planning of their missions. The team had free reign in the bunker and polite nods came from the Germans acknowledging his presence in whatever room he happened to be in at the moment. He happened into the “command center” of the bunker and found several of the resistance group at work doing different things. While he didn’t speak German, one of the members spoke very good English and translated the questions for him or answered them himself.

“You guys have been at this how long?” asked Darren.

“Since right after the invasion. Well, not really. We actually got together right after the Fall to help defend this area against the roving gangs,” said Alexander Peters, the marksman of the group.

“Your band has been together that long?” asked Darren.

“No, not the entire group, but a lot of us. This area was heavily plundered after the Fall since we are a farming region and had more food than anyone else. We took to defending the area since we weren’t about to give away our food to those who didn’t earn it. After the invasion, we banded together with other local groups and coordinated our actions hitting the IU whenever we could. Since our group was one of the larger ones, we took lead on the decision making around here. But we take advice from everyone,” said Alexander.

“Any other groups out there?” asked Darren.

“A few. Bitburg has some pretty large cells operating. Wittlich mainly works with us here in Speicher. Daun and Prüm have good sized groups that we work with from time to time. The Trier *Freiheitskämpfer* have pretty much been wiped out since a large portion of the IU troops are stationed there. Plus, they have made progress on converting Germans against their countrymen and they show the IU where the resistance members are located,” said Alexander.

“You have German’s working against Germans?” asked Darren.

“It is not unusual. Following the Fall, there were many Muslims in our country, Algerians, Tunisians, Turks and the likes. Some were actually sleeper agents recruited before the Fall for God only knows what, others were happy to be ‘liberated’ by the IU when they arrived. They have been dealt with effectively since then,” said Alexander, not elaborating on how exactly that was done.

“Any reason to be worried right now?” asked Darren.

“No, our group is secure. Most of us ‘died’ over the years, at least according to what was reported to the local IU Government. Even after this long, they still don’t have an accurate count on how many people there really are living around here,” said Alexander.

“And the other groups are the same?” asked Darren.

“I guess so. I don’t really know. These things are kept secret from each other in case one of us is captured,” said Alexander.

“That’s pretty reasonable. Sounds like you have a pretty good set up,” said Darren. “Where did you learn your English?”

“I was a foreign exchange student for two years. I kind of had to learn English,” chuckled Alexander.

“And the rest of your group?” asked Darren.

“Some English, but not a lot. Erik speaks it very well, but the rest only have limited skills since we don’t use it that much. Some of our guys worked on the base before the Fall and had to speak English, but since then, they just haven’t used it,” said Alexander.

“What about communications?” asked Darren.

“We have radios that can receive in this bunker, but not transmit. We do not want to give away our position to the IU forces in the area. Our transmitters are moved around instead of operating in one set location,” said Alexander.

“Do you use them to coordinate with the other resistance groups?” asked Darren.

“No, that is done in person or by use of dead drops. When we meet, it is typically in a neutral location,” said Alexander.

“And how are your supplies?” asked Darren.

“We get our weapons and ammunition from the IU forces so that is fairly easy. The fuel for the generators comes from the black market or from local farmers who produce alcohol. The batteries powering up the bunker here came from a lot of different sources; some from the old base right after the Fall, some from the surrounding area and some from the IU. They are fairly big in the black market trade around here getting what they want. You would be surprised at what a case of good German beer gets you from the IU,” laughed Alexander.

“They drink alcohol?” asked Darren.

“Yes, not all of them are good little Muslims. They still like to have a drink or two,” said Alexander.

“And clothing?” asked Darren.

“Depends on what we are doing. We sometimes use the IU uniforms to confuse them and other times we just wear our normal clothing,” said Alexander. “But your people dropped some additional uniforms in the drop yesterday and the parachutes will be used to make new clothing unless you want them back.”

“No, we hadn’t planned on taking them back with us,” said Darren. “What kind of uniforms?”

“I don’t know, it looks green sometimes and other times brown. Here is one,” he said, picking up an item out of a box near the desk. It was a brand new Multicam shirt in the ACU style.

“I didn’t know they were shipping in clothing with the drop,” said Darren.

“Neither did we, but your people apparently threw in a bunch of items. Rations, water filters, clothing, explosives...but we really didn’t need any more of those...of course the cigarettes, medical supplies and some coffee. They did us right when they dropped everything on those pallets,” said Alexander.

“All we knew of was the cigarettes and that seemed like a lot for three pallets,” laughed Darren.

“One of our smokers was the one that sent the radio message,” laughed Alexander.

“I thought firearms were strictly controlled in Germany before the Fall,” observed Darren.

“They were, but there were always people who had them or knew where to get them. There were hunters and shooters, but the ownership of weapons was under strict control before the Fall. But

in the aftermath, the local government just didn't care any longer. And we generally kept everything from raids and battles but most of our weapons come from the IU now," said Alexander.

"So what's the plan for today?" asked Darren.

"I will be leading your team to the communications bunker and after that, it's all on you. Erik will be back later on to show the rest of your team what we know already so they can help plan from here," said Alexander.

"Sounds good. You have some time to go over a route with me?" asked Darren.

"Yes, I was wondering if you all were planning on that," said Alexander.

The two took out the map Darren had of the area and started going over the planned routes from the bunker and their enroute stop point in the town of Zemmer. While they didn't know the exact place they would be spending the night, Alexander knew Erik had sent out someone to make contact with the residents in advance. He showed Darren the known checkpoints and patrol routes of the IU forces in the area and the easiest and safest way of getting into the town after they left. The route Darren chose was a good one and was somewhat direct into the town after dog legging away from the bunker so their path could not be traced directly back to the entrance. He made a few suggestions along the way, but saw the American had a good plan already. When they finished, Darren started putting the patrol legs down on a piece of paper to distribute to the team before their mission. The coordinates for the GPS would be saved after they left and satellite reception was back online.

"Did I miss anything?" asked Darren.

"No, your path is a good one and only needed a little bit of help from us locals. I think you might have been fine without our help," said Alexander.

"What about minefields? Does the IU ever put them out?" asked Darren, worried about stepping into a bad situation.

"No, at least not around something like that. They tried it around the *Flugplatze* when they first arrived, but the woods have animals that kept setting them off. Now they do not put them out anymore," said Alexander.

"I'm kind of worried that you two do not know how our team operates. You know, our standard procedures and all," said Darren.

"It is not really a concern. If we are discovered and have to start shooting, we will cover your back and sides and let your team deal with the front. Will this be acceptable?" asked Alexander.

"Yes, but there is more to it than that," said Darren.

“Yes, but the object here is not to get caught is it not?” asked Alexander.

“Yes, that is the object,” said Darren.

“Then we will do our best to not get caught and keep you and your people from getting caught as well,” said Alexander with a laugh.

“Good deal. How long before you guys are ready?” asked Darren.

“I’m kind of ready when you are. There will only be two of us going with you and your team. Other than that, we are waiting on Erik’s contact to return with the safe house information. You have done things like this before?” asked Alexander.

“Yeah, this is nothing more than a simple recon which we have practiced plenty of times over and over. The main difference is this just happens to be behind enemy lines,” said Darren, smelling coffee perking on the nearby stove.

“We have some extra cups if you want one,” said Alexander following Darren’s gaze at the faded and chipped enamel coffee pot.

“Nah, I’ll grab my canteen cup, but thanks anyway,” said Darren as he returned to the room where his gear and the remainder of his team was sleeping. Trying not to wake them, he quietly grabbed his gear from where he had set it, ready to be put on in a moment’s notice. The canteen cup was the same design that had been around for years on end and probably would still be around long after he was gone. He replaced the canteen in the pouch and was on his way out of the room when Martin stopped him.

“Is that coffee I smell?” he asked.

“Yeah, apparently they had some in the supply drop when we came in,” said Darren.

“Think there is enough to go around for everyone?” asked Martin.

“I think one cup wouldn’t be much of a problem,” said Darren.

“Cool,” was all that Martin said as he dug out his own canteen cup and returned with Darren to the command center.

After sipping at the hot brew and enjoying the minor piece of civilization in the underground bunker, they went back to the room to wake the others in their team to begin packing and wake the next group to keep watch. They had brought along extra rations and would divvy into the airdropped supplies a little, but not too much as they knew the resistance fighters would be able to make better use of the supplies in the long run than they would. Packing for their excursion had already been accomplished in the small assault pack attached to their main packs. The packs carried three days of necessary gear and supplies to keep the personnel alive and in good shape. They had learned a long time ago what to pack and what to leave behind and could keep the

weight under fifteen pounds minus water for the most part. But adding in additional ammunition, water and mission specific gear only weighed them down more. But for this simple recon, they could carry the bare essentials.

Frank and Jeremy were woken and told to prepare for the mission. They were unaware of any shower facilities and did their best to wash up using a small washcloth carried in their main pack and water heated on the stove top. They didn't shave for the moment and instead grabbed for the camouflage compacts carrying the face paint for their mission. Dark greens and browns would be the preferred colors along with the grays and lighter greens for the natural shadow areas of their faces. The uniforms were already approved and ready to go, but Darren told them to pack in their snow camouflage over garments. Each person pulled the silnylon gear and packed it away. The gear used basic white along with shades of light gray and splotches of brown and green to break up the pattern. They also had a pack cover which would cinch down nicely over their assault packs for the mission out.

As the remainder of the group was preparing, Darren woke Thomas to inform him he would be heading out soon. After waking up, he requested a basic plan from Darren and was briefed about the assistance from the Germans with the patrol routes.

"I don't like having to depend on them for these kinds of things. But this group is pretty good according to the intelligence reports," said Thomas.

"The routes he suggested look sound and are taking us well away from the checkpoints and patrol routes of the IU forces. It only adds about a click and a half to our route," said Darren.

"If you are comfortable with it, I suppose I can't argue. How's the weather?" asked Thomas.

"Generally crappy. Around freezing with light snow," said Darren.

"Sounds like the weather wishers are spot on. At least it's better than it was when we were in Iceland," chuckled Thomas, remembering the days on end with rain, drizzle, rain, downpours and then some further rain.

"Yeah, when they said it was going to be sunny, I just about fell out of my chair," laughed Darren.

"So everything is a go?" asked Thomas.

"Should be. Everyone is getting geared up right now. Did you know what was in the supply drop?" asked Darren.

"No, I didn't look at the packing list," said Thomas.

"You would be surprised," said Darren as he listed the gear that had been sent in to the packages. "So camouflage isn't a concern."

“We can spare two sets of snow cammies if you want them for our guides,” said Thomas.

“That might be helpful. The one guy Alexander is about your size, so if you don’t mind,” said Darren.

Thomas opened his main pack and went straight to the pocket where the clothing was stored.
“And the other guy?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t met him yet. Let me go ask Alexander,” said Darren.

Thomas pulled the two pieces out and went along with Darren to the command center. He found Erik had returned at some point and was briefing his people in German about something.

“We have the address for the house you will be staying at,” said Erik as he noticed the two that walked in.

“They are expecting us?” asked Thomas.

“Yes, we sent the message and got a reply. They are more than happy to help out,” said Erik.

“Great. Who is the other person going with Snoopy’s team?” asked Thomas.

“A man named Christian will be going along. Why do you ask?” asked Erik.

“We are going to loan them some snow camouflage,” said Darren.

“We have some white clothing already if we need it,” said Erik.

“True, but this stuff makes you invisible in the snow,” said Thomas as he held up the shirt to show him.

After observing it for several moments, Erik agreed it would be better than the cotton sheets they planned on using. Thomas tossed the suit and pack cover to Alexander and was pointed in the direction of Christian Schmidt. Thomas quickly sized him up and decided Willy Perez was the closest in size. He departed to the team room and woke him up and requested he give up his suit. Willy did so without hesitation and handed over the items before rolling back into his poncho liner and going back to sleep.

Thomas returned to the command center and handed over the suit, gaining a “*Danke*” in the process. Alexander was busy packing away some items in a small backpack made from what appeared to be the remains of several old camouflage uniform items. It seemed like it would be fine to work in the environment due to the mottled nature of the cloth along with the dirt it had accumulated over the years. He was also changing into the Multicam uniform and trading in his SVD rifle for a more conventional AKM. Everything appeared to be in order and Darren copied down his patrol information for Thomas before briefing in his own team about what was going on. By the time he got done, his team was ready and waiting outside the command center.

Since Christian didn't speak English that well, Alexander was standing next to him translating what Darren was briefing the team along the way. A couple of times, Darren had to pause so Alexander could catch up and he worried somewhat about having a non English speaker on the mission. But he also knew it was better to have a person familiar with the area. Darren was also worried that the two didn't know the standard procedures for the team, but again, the pros outweighed the cons in this matter. The briefing was finished up and the patrol routes given out along with the standard safety briefing about being unseen while on patrol. Their job as a recon patrol depended upon their ability to blend in with the environment and get in and out without leaving a trace of ever being there, but getting the critical details necessary for the coming strike. And while they were prepared to fight, their job was to watch and learn rather than go in with guns blazing. And although they were far behind the lines and the rear area troops might have been more complacent than the troops in France and the Low Countries, they planned out the smallest details. He finished his briefing by having the group say the unwritten rules they came up with a long time ago. They started out together, saying aloud one last time almost like a chant.

"First rule: proper planning prevents poor performance. The second rule: never assume. Third rule: if you are to assume, assume the worst case; assume the enemy is just as well armed and equipped as you are and assume they know each and every move you are going to make. Fourth rule: be as unpredictable as a feather in a tornado. Fifth rule: nobody gets left behind, everyone comes home."

And with that, they finished up last minute details of getting ready to go and started gearing up. They were joined by the two Germans who had changed and were getting their gear ready as well. They didn't have much and it was well worn, but still in good shape and functional. In comparison, the team was like a fully loaded Navigator and the two Germans like a Pinto with an AM radio. But they were willing to lay it out on the line for people they had known less than a day and that counted for a lot with the team.

"Alexander, would you and Christian mind taking the lead? You know the way we are heading," requested Darren.

"Certainly," they said as they stepped out of the tunnel and into the rapidly fading light and headed south away from the bunker. The area had already been cleared by an additional resistance patrol earlier and they made good time along the bank of the Kyll River before moving east towards the first leg of the patrol route. While still under cover, Darren and Jeremy programmed their respective GPS receivers and input the patrol routes and waypoints. Everything was going according to plan as they put on their night vision devices and the area turned to greens and blacks. The snow started falling once again and would hamper the night vision somewhat, but would also hamper any efforts on the part of the IU patrols. Thermal imagers were a different matter and the team hoped and prayed the enemy was not using them tonight.

They made good time and were amazed at the field craft of the two Germans as they silently led the patrol towards the town of Zemmer. They were also using sets of captured IU night vision

goggles which weren't as good as the sets designed and built at the new factory in Georgia. But they worked well enough for the purposes tonight. They bypassed the town of Preist and entered the woods nearby, avoiding the pathways that cut through the popular hiking spots before the Fall. They would still have to cross major open areas, but for the most part could remain under the cover of the vegetation for the most part.

Just as they were coming out of the woods near the village of Schonfelderhof near their eventual destination, headlights of a vehicle were seen in the distance. They all froze in place, knowing the vehicle couldn't see them at that distance, but still keeping a watchful eye in case they headed their way. The vehicle had come from the direction of the town of Orenhofen and was heading up the roughly paved roadway they were getting ready to cross.

"Back to the woods!" said Darren, his voice carrying farther than he wanted in the evening air. The six scampered their way back towards the woods and got inside the trees where they could still observe the road, but have decent cover in case they needed it. Weapons were readied and each watched the vehicle intently as it continued up the road, coming to a stop near their position...

"I know I saw something up here as we left the town! At least three objects in the thermal camera!" exclaimed the young Libyan Private sitting in the rear of the all purpose vehicle. He continued to swivel it back and forth near the trees they were looking at.

"Maybe it was an animal or something. There are deer all over this area," said the Corporal in charge of the routine patrol.

"I don't think so. They didn't look big enough for them," said the Private, staring intently into the thermal viewer. A couple of hot spots were there, but nothing that looked human or the size of an animal.

"Maybe some of those filthy boars. Do you see anything now?" asked the Corporal.

"No, I can't see anything in the thermal," said the Private.

"Best we make a check just in case. You two check out the trees over there," ordered the Corporal to the other two privates sitting in the somewhat warm vehicle.

They dejectedly grabbed their AKM rifles and departed the vehicle, pulling on jackets as they did so. One grabbed a large handheld spotlight and they headed towards the general area where Darren and his team waited. Jeremy readied his light machine gun to take out the vehicle as Martin got a grenade ready as well. The range was close to the maximum effective range of three hundred and fifty meters, but he could hit the target with little problems. The remainder of the team got ready to take out the two soldiers if it came to it.

The two Privates wandered along the edge of the trees, shining the spotlight as they went along. About fifty meters away from their position, a boar scampered out of the underbrush and headed towards the road, startling everyone concerned. Rifle fire followed it as it headed across the road, disappearing into the long uncut grass in the farm fields nearby.

“I don’t think we hit it,” observed the first Private.

“You never hit anything. Come on, it’s cold out here,” said the second as he turned towards the waiting vehicle which was inching its way up the road towards the two.

“Nothing but one of those wild pigs,” said the Private as they reentered the vehicle.

“I thought I saw more than one on the thermal,” said the first Private.

“Maybe you did, but there was only one that jumped out at us,” said the other.

“Check as we drive along, the chow hall is almost closed and we need to get back to the air base,” said the Corporal as he drove slowly up the road.

The Private trained the thermal camera on the trees, but by this time, the outer garments of the team were starting to cool down along with the packs on their back. Their IR signature was being reduced and they also had vegetation between them and the vehicle. Eventually it was out of sight and the tail lights disappeared.

“We wait another ten minutes before moving again,” said Darren over the radio to his team and shivered at the close call along with the temperatures that were lowering.

After waiting for the required time, Darren got up and crept out of the woods, checking along the way with his night vision goggles. He increased the power to three and six before calling it good and waving the rest of the team out.

“We need to get moving quickly across this field. I don’t like being exposed like this,” said Darren.

“It is far to the next cover, but we can make it in good time. There are no IU outposts nearby,” said Alexander, pulling at a strap on his LBE and moving away.

The rest of the team followed quickly as they crossed the large field and hardball road before getting back into the dubious safety of the long grass and continuing on their journey.

“I need to contact our higher headquarters,” said Thomas to Erik back in the bunker.

“Can it wait until later?” asked Erik.

“No, this is something that needs to be accomplished tonight. And also to let them know we cannot contact them as regularly as they want us to do,” said Thomas.

“We can give you a guide away from here. We do not transmit anything within five kilometers of the bunker,” said Erik.

“It will only be two of us going along and it is a burst transmission,” said Thomas.

“I will go along with you as well as one other person. We should keep the group small. Is your message prepared already?” asked Erik.

“Just need five more minutes before it will be ready,” said Thomas as he went off to inform Amber of their quick mission heading out. He was stopped by Michael who objected to the two of them leaving.

“No can do, Warbucks. You are too important to this mission,” said Michael.

“And so are you,” said Thomas as he readied his patrol pack.

“You wouldn’t hesitate for a moment to take the transmitter away from me and go,” said Michael.

“Yes I would and you know it should be me going along. You aren’t going to talk me out of it and you know it,” said Thomas.

“Even if I ask nicely. Seriously boss, you need to stick around and let someone else do it,” said Michael.

“No, it has to be me. Besides, look at this as an early promotion in case I don’t make it back,” grinned Thomas. “As soon as I find out where we are heading, I’ll give you a GOTWA.”

“Sure I can’t talk you out of it?” asked Michael.

“Nah, just mind the store while I’m gone,” said Thomas as he returned to Erik to inquire as to the location they would be going.

“Phillipsheim would be best. It fits the criteria and is far enough away, but is not an easy walk,” said Erik as he pointed it out on the German map.

Thomas consulted his own map and found the terrain would be a little rough getting back and mentally calculated the time and distance involved. “Are we taking the direct route or going by the river?” he asked.

“Probably the direct route. It looks bad, but there are IU patrols on the river trails from time to time,” said Erik as he looked over the map.

“Okay, let me let my people know and we will be gone,” he said as he returned to the team room and briefed both Michael and Rick. “Okay, I’m going to a spot near Phillipsheim here,” he said as he pointed at the map. “And I’m taking Glamour with me. Expected time back should be variable between eleven hundred and thirteen hundred, but no later than fourteen hundred I hope. You are expected to continue on mission without us if we do not return, turning over command to Snoopy upon his return or taking charge of the mission yourself and evaluating the chances of continuing with the six of us out of play. And if you are hit before I return, you will proceed to rally point black and await further contact from myself or higher headquarters. Any questions?”

Neither of the other two team leaders had anything further to say and just wished him luck and shook his hand. Amber had grabbed both their packs and was waiting in the entrance tunnel to leave. “Snow has stopped for the moment.”

“Good. I know it helps us, but I do hate the cold,” said Thomas.

“You aren’t the only one. But this time, I know we aren’t going to have a nice comfy shelter along the way. No manna from heaven on this one,” she chuckled as Erik and another member, Hans Wolfe, came walking down the tunnel, dressed in more of the Multicam gear and carrying small backpacks for their trip.

“Is everyone ready?” asked Erik.

“Yeah, let’s do this,” said Thomas as the vision blocks were checked once again and the four departed the bunker to complete a mission which would take less than five minutes to conduct.

“This is the house,” whispered Alexander after they circled around the town of Zemmer. They had avoided it all together and gone around to the south side where the house was located. It sat somewhat secluded on the southern end of town, but had several others nearby. The house was owned by the cousin of one of the men in the resistance group and was their designated safe zone that night. It had taken far longer than they had planned to get where they were going, but sometimes things didn’t go as planned. They came from the rear of the house where a back door was located, sneaking as best as they could. In the early morning hours, they knew the chances of a patrol coming through the town was unlikely, but knew it was still possible. Alexander and Darren made the approach to the back door, being covered by the other four waiting silently within effective weapons firing range.

Alexander rapped on the door, making noise that carried in the still night air. After ten seconds of not receiving a reply, he knocked once again, a little louder this time. The curtain next to the door was pulled back and Alexander spoke German in whispered tones to the occupant. The door

immediately flung open and the occupant inside motioned quickly with his hand to come in, all the time peering out of the back door at the surrounding area. Darren quickly got on his radio to call the rest of the team in and saw them rise from their positions and run towards the house.

Once inside the small kitchen area, they were waved further into the house to a small staircase leading towards what was presumably a basement. A small oil lamp at the bottom of the stairs lit the way into the depths of the house where they would be for the next twelve hours or so. They found the basement area had stacked firewood for the fireplace and stoves upstairs near the staircase, but had been conveniently stacked to provide concealment for the six from prying eyes. Spare blankets were seen along with some hay for some odd reason. Jars full of vegetables, or what was left of them sat along shelves showing the occupants were at least fed through the winter.

Alexander spoke with the man and his wife for several minutes and saw another figure walk past the staircase. When he inquired about whom else was in the house, he was met with silence.

“You need to tell us who else is here. We are not a threat to you in any way,” said Alexander.

“But we do not know the people you brought with you,” said the man.

“No, but we do and we trust them to help the cause. Are you hiding someone else in the house?” asked Alexander pointedly.

“Yes, two people actually and they were not supposed to come downstairs until after you all were asleep. Some friends of ours from Trier sent their daughters to live here away from the IU forces since it is safer. They are hiding for the most part with us,” said the woman.

“And you are worried about us finding out about them?” asked Alexander.

“We remember quite well the Americans from the base and how they used to come after nice German girls. And you believe these are any different?” asked the woman, just as pointedly.

“No, these are different. They are professional soldiers sent here to do a job and nothing more. And besides, what could possibly happen in the twelve hours we will be here?” asked Christian reasonably after joining the conversation without being invited.

“I do not want them hurt or have hope more are coming soon. We know it will be a long time before the Army of the Americans comes here, but they still have hopes and dreams they will be liberated by a knight on a white horse called an American,” said the woman.

“I will let the Americans know not to interfere with the young ladies,” said Alexander as he turned to go behind the woodpile in the basement where they would hide.

“Problems?” asked Frank.

“No, there are two young women living here as well and the man and woman are afraid you all will do something rash with them,” said Alexander.

“I’m married with children as is Snoopy. Irish has a girlfriend back in Texas so that leaves Solo as our only bachelor. I can control him if we need too. You guys want to help with the watch?” asked Frank.

“Yes, that will be fine as soon as we have eaten and gotten a fire started in this stove,” said Alexander, pointing at the old cast iron stove along the wall of the basement.

Various kindling was found and a fire quickly started and fed. Darren gave out fire watch assignments to the group, now coming down from the mission and feeling fairly tired. They hadn’t walked all that far, at least not as far as they had practiced from time to time, but under the stress of being that far behind enemy lines, the run in with the patrol and being hidden in a house surrounded by the enemy were all factors of stress for the team. But it was now starting to wear off and each got a little sleepy. They had all hit the ground running since they had parachuted in and had a fairly strict timeline to stick to. Their recon was key to taking down the communications site and they knew they needed to be at the top of their game to do it. And they knew they needed rest to be at the top of their game. One by one, they ate and sacked out using the borrowed blankets and were fast asleep.

“Right about here should do it,” whispered Thomas as he checked the GPS near the town of Phillipsheim.

“We are far enough away I think. How long will you be transmitting?” asked Erik.

“Less than two seconds as soon as I can link up with the satellite. It doesn’t take that long,” said Thomas as he pulled the small satellite transceiver out of the pouch on his gear. Slightly thicker than an old iPhone, but having the same general dimensions, the new communications device was the latest and greatest in secure communications in the FNC. The message was going to be sent in a text format, although the device could handle voice as well as instant messaging, picture downloads and supported most of the programs of Microsoft. But for this message, shorter was simpler.

Starting the device, it took a couple of minutes to “find” the communications satellites in orbit at the time. Selecting one, he hooked up the small “dish,” unfolding the device to about the size of a teacup and pointed it towards the general area of the sky where it was located. It locked on after several seconds to determine if the device on the group was absolutely authorized to be hooked up. Thomas input the command code of the day and sent the message to the satellite where it would be bounced back to RAF Mildenhall and their command center. He waited for several minutes before finding three incoming messages for him. It was unusual for him to

receive so many in that time period and would wait until they were back at the bunker to check them.

“That’s it. Ready to go,” he said as he shut off the device and replaced it in the pouch.

“That was all?” asked Erik.

“Told you it wouldn’t take long,” said Thomas.

“We need to get going then. It will be light out soon,” said Erik as he picked up his AKM and started leading the way back. Thomas and Amber were in the middle and Hans bringing up the rear as they got back into the trees and headed in a southerly direction towards the bunker.

Daylight was coming on fast, but they were making decent time in the thick undergrowth of the area. Suddenly, Erik’s hand came up in a “Stop!” motion and waved them towards the ground. A patrol of four IU soldiers were walking along the pathway adjacent to their course. While they were not on a direct course to intercept the small team, they would come within thirty meters if they continued on their present course.

But they did not continue as planned. They diverted on a direct course towards the four and started covering the one hundred meters between the two groups. Time stood still as the two groups were about to meet violently.

CHAPTER 10 – TIME STANDS STILL

Date/Time: 13 March/0547

Location: Near Phillipsheim, Occupied Germany

Thomas peered over the sight on his M-4 at the advancing patrol of IU personnel who were completely unaware of the death that awaited them so nearby. Each of the four members of the group picked a target carefully and sighted in, waiting for that opportune moment to fire and take each and every one of them down at the same time. Not knowing who would fire first to open the ambush, Thomas decided at fifty meters he would fire and set everything off. He saw his target through the reflex scope stop briefly to check a compass and a map. He walked a few steps before checking it again, almost within the chosen kill zone.

Suddenly he shouted to the remaining members of his patrol team and pointed at the map. They circled around him and looked as he pointed at the map and spoke in Arabic, pointing in the direction of the team and then at a right angle to where they were currently heading. He pointed at the map and exclaimed a phrase in Arabic while punching the map with his finger to accentuate the remarks. Another of the group checked the compass and the map and nodded his agreement. They looked around as if to find something, but looked right past the camouflaged team that waited patiently for them. With slumped shoulders, they started back up the steep incline away from the heading they had currently been on.

Thomas and the rest of the team remained motionless for several moments before Erik started to get up in pursuit of the small IU patrol. But before he was able to go forward, he was stopped by Thomas.

“What are you doing?” he whispered.

“I am going to find them and kill them,” said Erik very coldly.

“You need to back off a little and evaluate. This might be part of a larger patrol which we can’t handle,” said Thomas reasonably.

“But you do not understand. It is not often we get only four out that is so easy a target. Yes, there may be more, but we can evade them as we always have in the past,” said Erik, preparing his rifle.

“And the rest of their group might be just behind those trees, we don’t know. Our mission out here was to get a message sent off to my superiors and not to start trouble. You objected to coming out here anyway, correct?” asked Thomas. He knew he was delaying for time as the enemy patrol would soon be impossible to find in the forest.

Erik looked again in the direction of the patrol now slipping away and at Thomas. Coming to a decision in his mind, he sighed and simply stated “You do not understand.”

“I think I do understand,” said Thomas, again reasonably. “You seem eager to go off and start trouble. What is the rush?”

“I am doing this because I have a family, and they should be free. I want my daughter to grow up in a free place where we can believe what we want to believe. By killing those four it means we are that much closer to victory. I want my daughter to be able to do the things in life she wants to do. I want my daughter to grow up proud and live in a place where she is free from fear. I want my Elke to be able to reach the stars like she wants to do,” said Erik.

“We will gladly help you do this. But we have to be patient. I understand your family has lived under the IU rule for many years. You have been patient this far, what is a little more time?” asked Thomas.

“I am eager, yes, but I understand all good things come to those who are patient. If you say we need to wait then yes, I can be patient at least until you leave,” grinned Erik.

“And I thank you for stopping. Do not worry my friend, we will have our revenge very soon,” said Thomas. “But for now, we must get back to the bunker where it is safe.”

“Yes, you are correct and I have placed you in unnecessary danger. I am sorry for that. We need to proceed carefully now as it is light and the IU will be out more,” said Erik.

“Let’s just get back and we can worry about the rest later,” said Thomas.

Erik resumed his point man duties and started off again on the incline away from the enemy patrol’s heading. He was as quiet as he could be, slowly gaining ground on the steep slope next to the Kyll River as they continued their journey towards safety. Thomas began to worry about being out in the daylight, but if they were careful, they shouldn’t have a problem. But he preferred the dark. Nighttime conceals you and helps hide your movements. Nighttime is your friend and ally. Nighttime gives you an advantage over your enemy which you can exploit. But it was not to be currently.

Martin was currently on the firewatch for the team waiting in the safe house in Zemmer. He could hear movement on the ground floor of the house, but hadn’t made contact with the occupants. He fed a few more pieces of wood into the stove and briefly warmed his hands. It was chilly in the basement, but not uncomfortably so as the heat from the stove was helping to warm the area. He continued his lonely vigil as the remainder of the team slept away in comfortable silence except for Frank who was snoring just a little. Martin went over and pushed at his shoulder with his boot to roll him onto his side as he had done in times past. Apparently Frank’s wife often did so in his sleep and he rolled onto his side without much prompting.

Martin chuckled as he went back to the old chair he had been sitting on and continued his watch over his sleeping comrades.

Soft footsteps were heard coming down the stairs from the house into the basement. Immediately on guard, he pulled his pistol with the suppressor attached at the staircase until he saw what had to be women's feet in socks tiptoeing down the stairs. He put down the pistol and saw what had to be one of the young ladies Frank had warned him about before going to sleep. She was in her late teens or early twenties and attractive in a girl next door way. Seeing him up and about, she smiled at him and whispered "*Guten Morgen*."

"*Guten Morgen*," he whispered back and saw she was carrying a bowl and a cup with something steaming inside. She handed it over to him with a smile and a nod.

"Thank...*Danke*," he said, catching himself and trying to speak the local words. However, his Texas twang all but murdered the German word.

She giggled at his attempts to speak German and continued "*Sprechen Sie Deutsch?*"

"*Nein, sprechen Sie English?*" he asked in return as he took the bowl and cup from her offered hands.

"A little, I am no good English," she said with a smile and thinking of the words she heard from time to time on the illegal radio broadcasts.

Martin laughed at her attempts but understood what she was trying to say. He saw the bowl had stewed tomatoes inside. Not exactly a normal breakfast, but with the shortages in the country, it was food and it was warm so he couldn't complain. The mug had some sort of tea inside. He waved his hand holding the bowl at the seat and she sat down, staring at him intently. He knew she wanted to say something and both looked at each other and giggled at the lack of communication. However, laughter is the universal communication when all else fails. He started spooning out the food and tried to be as proper as he could in the setting.

"You are pilot?" she asked as he continued to shovel in the tomatoes and trying very hard to remember basic German phrases so he could talk with her.

"*Nein*, I am not a pilot. Why did you ask me that?" he asked.

"An...airplane? Is this correct word? Was...ummm...I do not know English. Down?" she asked, trying to think of the words.

"Shot down?" he asked.

"I do not know how to say," she smiled and laughed softly. "An airplane was *hier vor zwei Nächte und...*" she paused before bringing her hands together showing him it crashed.

"An airplane was shot down, I understand that. No, I am not a pilot," he said.

“You are soldier?” she asked.

“*Ja*, I am a soldier,” he said with a smile.

“You come to...ahh...free us?” she asked intently.

“*Nein*, I come to do something else,” he said in return, not wanting to give up details of their mission.

“You no come to free us?” she asked, a little sad and confused.

“Yes, we will come eventually to free you,” he said with a smile, giving her a little hope.

“*Ich nicht verstehen*,” she said with a slight laugh, trying to interpret what he was saying.

“Not now. No free you now, *verstehen*?” he asked.

“What you do *hier*?” she asked.

“I am not allowed to say. It must be a secret,” he said.

“I no understand,” she said with a puzzled look.

“I can’t tell you why I am here,” he said.

The phrase was translated into German by Alexander who had woken up hearing the two whispering back and forth. A light sleeper, even the faint conversation they were having made his eyes pop open and his senses aware. Alexander continued in German explaining the team was in Germany to perform a secret mission and she shouldn’t ask many questions about it for her own safety. She nodded her understanding of the situation and went back to watching him intently and wanting to speak further with the American who could have come to save them. But again, the language barrier was hindering their chances to talk more. Martin didn’t want to rely on a third party to translate everything and decided it was better to let the rest of his team sleep.

A voice was heard from the top of the stairs, speaking softly in deference of the sleeping individuals in the basement. “Monika?”

“*Ja, Ich kommen*,” she said as the older woman peered into the basement. Monika smiled one last time at the friendly American and scampered up the stairs, although quietly. Before closing the basement door, the older woman shot Martin a dirty look that spoke volumes.

“What was that all about?” he asked, seeing Alexander standing next to him.

“The older woman is worried about the two younger girls. She knows it is not safe for them with the IU, but also it is not safe to give them hope about you being here,” said Alexander.

“What do you mean it is not safe?” asked Martin.

“Many pretty young girls are being abducted and sent to the Islamic Union as sex slaves which is why they are living here. But the older man and woman also remember the Americans who used to be at the NATO base a long time ago. Some didn’t have the best reputations when it came to dealing with the German women. Love them and leave them I guess would sum it up. So they are protective of the two girls living here,” explained Alexander.

“The IU is sending women away as slaves?” asked Martin, who had not ever heard anything like that.

“Yes, for the past couple of years it has been happening. Women are disappearing and we think they are ending up somewhere in the IU. Since the largest contingent of their forces locally is in Trier, women there are not safe,” said Alexander.

“I’m not that kind of guy! I would never do anything to hurt them!” protested Martin.

“Probably not, but old feelings die hard in some people. I’ll explain later you were just being friendly,” said Alexander.

“I hope they don’t come after me with a pitchfork or something,” laughed Martin.

“No, they keep an axe next to the door. I saw it on the way in,” laughed Alexander in return as he returned to his bunk and went back to sleep.

Martin continued his lonely watch until it was time to wake Darren for the next shift. He wondered what other nasty little surprises they would find out about the IU along the way and what they were doing to the nations they conquered.

Thomas, Amber, Erik and Hans made it back to the area of the bunker and waited to see if they had been followed. The route back had been filled with additional doglegs as they avoided a large scale training maneuver the IU had currently been conducting in the area of their patrol. At least a company of IU infantry had been out practicing patrol tactics in the area near Speicher and Beilingen on the cold morning. Since their job was also reconnaissance, Thomas and Amber took the time to observe the movements and found the troops generally unmotivated and lacking in sound leadership and tactics. Possibly it was the weather, but it might just be because they were just not that good. There were a few here and there that looked as if they could hold their own, but for the most part, the IU soldiers could be dealt with easy enough.

The patrol had to stop on four separate occasions to let the enemy pass by, watching them intently each and every time hoping they would continue on their path. They saw the main

exercise was to the north of Speicher and when they reached the area near the old train station, the IU soldiers were not seen any longer. A roadblock was on the L36 roadway, but that was easily bypassed as they made their way to the area where the bunker was located.

After determining they had not been followed, they resumed their course and headed in the direction of the bunker. Erik stopped and checked a few landmarks before walking several paces back and forth near a small group of trees. Pacing off another five steps, he stopped and dug at a small pile of leaves, pulling a plastic bag out from underneath. Inside was an ancient TA-1 telephone they had gotten from God knows where. Erik quickly paced off another fifteen steps, turned right and paced another twenty five, digging again at the ground before coming up with the covered ends of the communication wires and putting them into the telephone. He “rang” the other end and spoke quickly in German letting them know they were back and had not been followed.

He pulled the wires away from the phone while Hans replaced the ground cover on the wires. Erik returned the phone to its original location and replaced it in the bag and covered it up, hidden once again.

“Nice set up you have here,” observed Thomas.

“Yes, it seems to work okay,” said Erik.

The door to the bunker opened and the four quickly went in, shedding packs and equipment along the way. It was not snowing, but the overcast skies and blustery wind set a chill into each as they quickly found places around the nearest stove and warmed up. Cups of hot chicken soup were shoved into their hands as they took off the outer clothing down to their long sleeve thermals to warm up quicker.

“How did it go?” asked Michael after being woken to let him know the team had returned.

“Pretty good, but a few bumps here and there,” said Thomas as he went on to explain the situations they had gotten into.

“Pretty eager bunch aren’t they?” asked Michael.

“For the most part. Learn anything new?” asked Thomas.

“Yes, one of them showed me the logs they have kept since they first started. If even half of it is true, these guys have either been good or very lucky,” said Michael.

“And you and I both know someone doesn’t get that lucky for that long,” said Thomas.

“Any incoming messages?” asked Michael.

“Yeah, three. I was waiting to warm up before decoding them and reading them,” said Thomas.

“No word from Darren’s team except that they were in place at the safe house. Of course we couldn’t send an acknowledgement, but they radioed in,” said Michael.

Thomas finished the cup of soup, grateful for the contents and finished warming up before taking the communications device into the team room and turning it back on. He knew this far underground it wouldn’t be able to connect, but kept that portion turned off in any case. He put in the security password three times before getting to the main screen of the device and opened the messages folder. If he had not put in the passwords correctly, he would have had one more chance before the CPU of the device would have zeroed the device and wiped the memory clear of everything, effectively destroying the device into nothing more than computer chips, a hard plastic case and random wires.

When he reached the message portions, he put in the daily security code before the device deciphered the messages to something more than random numbers, letters and symbols. The first message was an intelligence update on their location, also giving bomb damage assessments of the two airfields nearby. The intelligence was not surprising and after conferring with the Germans, they found it was out of date anyway.

The second message was about a bomber that had been shot down near their location in Weidenbach. A B-1 had been hit during a bombing run over Mannheim but the crew had stayed aboard long enough to make it out of the area before the aircraft tried to shake itself apart. But the four crew members managed to bail out and gave their coordinates as near the town of Weidenbach. Thomas would ask the resistance if they had anyone in that area to look for the crew and start taking them to safety.

The third message was a question as to why they had not communicated yet and wanting their status. However, Thomas had already known this might be the case and informed the headquarters in his message he would not be communicating as regularly as originally planned. He hoped they understood the need for secrecy and not transmitting near the bunker so the resistance would be kept safe.

“Looks like a bomber went down near here the other night. All four crew ejected and were somewhere near Weidenbach. Where is that at exactly?” asked Thomas to Michael and Erik.

“North of here. More in the Daun resistance area of operations than ours. We could send a message to them to assist in finding your pilots,” said Erik.

“How far north?” asked Michael.

“Thirty kilometers or more if I remember correctly,” said Erik.

“Too far north for us to go in and get. How long will it take you to pass a message to the other resistance group?” asked Thomas.

“Less than a day if we start now. If you have the location of the pilots, the resistance can pick them up and get them to the area where you are to be picked up,” said Erik.

“Send the message if you don’t mind and yes, I think them being picked up at the same location at the same time would be okay. But we don’t know when that will be,” said Thomas.

“They can keep them hidden until that time and we can pass another message when the time comes,” said Erik. “And the location?”

“Somewhere around here,” said Thomas as he pointed at the map. “Standard procedure is to head in the...what was yesterday?”

“Twelve March,” said Michael.

“Even number days in March, you head southwest for at least five kilometers for a pick up zone. So if I was a betting man that would put them...here or there about. Good cover, rough terrain but not for a helo, plenty of vegetation. Yeah, tell your people to start looking there,” said Thomas looking at the computer generated map overlay on his small computer device.

Michael looked over the map and saw everything was correct and agreed with the assessment of Thomas. “They will be a bit nervous about folks bumbling around in the woods near them. Hopefully there are some English speakers in that group.”

“Yes, I think Daun has a few people that speak English,” said Erik. “We will pass on this information to them.”

“Sounds like a plan. Any objections to me getting some sleep now?” asked Thomas.

“Nah, we got this. You go ahead and catch some shut eye and we will wake you when we hear anything,” said Michael. “Nice to have you back and all.”

“Next time, you get to go and have fun with the locals,” laughed Thomas.

“I tried to make you let me go anyway!” exclaimed Michael.

“I’m stubborn, you know that,” said Thomas, pulling off his boots and unrolling the blanket on the floor.

“Yeah, if anything changes, we will let you know,” repeated Michael.

“Please tell them thank you for the hospitality and hiding us in our time of need,” said Darren as the group started to shoulder their packs and ready their weapons.

Alexander translated the words into German for the man and woman living in the house. They gave polite nods and even a half a smile at the departing resistance members and the American team. It was slightly strange. Even though they were now from the Sovereign Republic of Colorado and officially a Coloradan (with the exception of Martin, who never missed an opportunity to remind the group he was a Texan) most members from the North American countries still referred to themselves as Americans. There was a pride in which State they were from, but overwhelmingly, they still called themselves Americans when introducing themselves to other people. Old habits died hard with the team.

As they departed the house, the older of the two sisters, Monika, smiled briefly at Martin. He caught it just in time to give a slight smile back until he caught the gaze of the older woman who gave him another dirty look. Feeling full of himself, he smiled at her too before stepping out of the back door and into the backyard where the garden was already being tilled by hand.

Night was falling quickly and the team put on their goggles and departed the house in the fading light, quickly moving away from the town into the large field nearby. Traffic was still seen out on the L46 roadway, moving both north and south in single vehicles up to ten vehicle convoys. They made their beeline directly south east to the tree line and started walking slower in the still damp leaves. It was starting to take a chill again and the night looked like it might call for more precipitation. Eventually they reached the roadway and prepared to cross it between the sporadic traffic coming and going. They had a decent view both up and down the road and knew they would have a brief window to cross over. They decided to scroll the road with an American pair going first, followed by the Germans and then the rear being brought up by the last two Americans.

Frank and Darren were the first ones across the road, checking the other side quickly before sending over the other two pairs and continuing on their march. They were a little closer now to the site, although it was several hilltops away, but the roadway was a mental barrier they crossed that let them know there were deep in Indian Country now. Steps were a little quieter, breathing was slowed, branches avoided instead of swiping against gear. Their eyes were darting around, looking for anything out of the ordinary, their ears perked up listening for any unusual sounds and they sniffed at the air for anything that might indicate anyone else nearby. They moved slowly, but with a purpose across the terrain towards the waypoint on the handheld GPS Frank was holding. He was not far ahead of the group, only twenty five meters, but far enough that the main group could not be detected, but also within range of supporting fires if needed.

After they had traveled a kilometer in, Frank called a halt for each person to rest quickly and drink down some water. Additionally, the Americans took out suppressors and screwed them onto the ends of their weapons. In case they ran into trouble, they wanted the problems to go away quietly if they could and get out of the area. Alexander almost stopped them, but knew it might be better if they were silent instead of firing off rounds that were not like the AKs he and Christian were carrying.

They continued towards the spot after the group got back up, continuing what some might see as a snail's pace. But in this world, slow was smooth and smooth was fast and they were not

behind schedule. They were making good time through the forest until Frank called for them to stop once again.

“GPS prox alert. We are at that huge clearing before the area we are going to be active in,” whispered Frank as the group gathered up.

“This is where we need to be extremely careful,” said Darren. “Recommendations?”

“Go quickly through the clearing and into the next woods. But the IU will have patrols out in that area, but probably not watching the fields,” said Alexander.

“I don’t want to take that chance though,” said Darren as he contemplated the area they were crossing.

“We’ll go. We are the junior team and we can clear the other side for you,” said Jeremy.

“You sure about that?” asked Frank.

“No problems,” said Martin, agreeing with his partner.

“Give us a call when everything is clear,” said Darren.

“See you in a few,” said Jeremy as he and Martin prepared to move across the large open field towards the forest on the other side. Lucky for them, the field would provide some concealment if they were detected as the grass had grown slowly over the winter and was up to about two foot in height. But the problem would be the grass that would be trampled down by the two crossing the field. But there really wasn’t time to think about that at that moment. They knew the boundary would need to be crossed.

They made their way quickly across the field, but did not run. Running would attract the attention of the eye, especially at night. And although overcast, there was still enough ambient light to detect movement. There were two roads crossing through the field, one hardball and another well traveled dirt road. They could see there was no traffic coming down either of them and continued on until they hit the other side. Jeremy stopped short of the forest along with Martin. They scanned the woods ahead of them for close to a minute before determining there was nothing moving ahead. They slowly crept into the woods close to ten meters before stopping once again to check out their surroundings, doing a SLLS check. Stop, look, listen and smell. For five minutes they sat in silence, scanning with all their senses before coming to the determination they were probably alone.

“Snoopy, this is Irish. Be advised, you are clear to proceed. We are fifty meters inside the tree line at the ten and two o’clock positions from where we entered,” said Jeremy.

“Roger, proceeding at this time,” said Darren, who spread the team out over a wide area in order to decrease the chances the grass would be trampled down more than it was already.

They made the crossing quicker than the previous two and entered the forest and stopped. They conducted their own SLLS check and could barely make out the outlines of Jeremy and Martin in the woods on one knee, looking out at the forest and being extremely still. After five minutes of natural sounds and nothing out of the ordinary, they decided they were probably alone or the IU was being very patient. They set out once again and looked for an Objective Rally Point other than the one they had specified on their way in. It was one thing to designate one on a map, but another entirely to see it from the ground level. They walked slowly and found one nearby that would work well, away from natural lines of drift, good cover and concealment, defensible with good escape routes if needed. The only thing missing was the nearby water source, but that also might be nearby.

Frank had already gone on a quick recon of the nearby area, looking for signs that anyone might be around. He didn't find anything out of the ordinary, but with the limited light, he could have missed something. He would do another check after daybreak, but for the moment they seemed secure enough in their current location.

"The bunker is over that way, maybe a kilometer or so," whispered Alexander.

"Pretty close don't you think?" asked Darren.

"Not especially so. Remember, the Muslims are trying to be covert in the use so they do not patrol out that far away from the bunker," said Alexander.

"I'm still not that comfortable with it, but this is your territory. We will cache the gear under the ground cover here and create some concealment for our positions," said Darren and acknowledged Frank when he returned. "Find anything useful?"

"Nothing much. This area seems to be untraveled except for a few game trails and even those are fairly unused. Good cover and concealment where we are at here and off the beaten path so to speak so we shouldn't have many problems with unexpected guests," said Frank.

"Okay, let's wait for daybreak and head out then. You and I will be the first up," said Darren as he put the other two on watch and had the Germans and Frank catch some sleep. He made a short radio broadcast to the bunker letting them know they were in position and starting their recon of the area. Not knowing how long they would be out there, he left the return time open ended and tried to catch a quick nap himself. The sleep didn't come easy this close to the wolf's lair.

"That was a little close," said the pilot of the downed bomber after hearing the truck roll by on the nearby roadway. They had planned on crossing the road, but at the last minute, the hairs on the back of the pilot's neck had stood on end and they had halted the crossing just as a lone IU truck rumbled by, hidden by the blind curve in the roadway.

“No kidding,” said the Offensive Systems Officer (OSO).

“Do we hit our locator beacons now or wait?” asked the Defensive Systems Officer (DSO).

“No, we should wait until we are further from the crash site. But the problem is the further away southwest we get, the closer it takes us to the bases,” said the pilot.

“Besides, we are a good ways inland and rescue is chancy at best,” said the co-pilot.

“So now what?” asked the OSO.

“We head directly east...I know that takes us away from the direction we are supposed to be heading in, but it also takes us further away from the crash site and the bases nearby,” said the pilot.

“And whatever time we spend on the ground is only minutes by the air. I think it is a good risk. They seem to be concentrating their search in that direction anyhow,” said the co-pilot.

The area was starting to have more frequent patrols looking for the downed bomber crew. More regular squad and platoon sized elements were seen sporadically throughout the day searching the area for the downed crew. But they had immediately headed in the proper direction once gathering up on the ground and made it quickly out of the immediate search area. The parachutes were buried under piles of leaves and brush and their global survival kits were checked before heading out. They still had enough food for four more days, but would start living off the land to stretch that supply in case they didn't have time to gather sustenance off the surrounding area.

“Well, ready when you guys are,” said the DSO. The MP7 Personal Defense Weapons were checked to ensure the safety was on and slung over the shoulders of the co-pilot and the DSO. Pistols were also checked and holstered, rounds in the chamber, but on safe. Survival kits were gathered and shouldered and the group started making their way as quietly as they could out of the small copse of trees they were currently hiding in. To their east was a stream where they would replenish their water and continue on, searching for the best place to hopefully be rescued by FNC forces. They would never make it to the place already picked out in the mind of the pilot.

36 hours later

“We have gained about everything we need here,” said Darren to Alexander.

“I agree and to stay longer risks detection by the patrols we have seen. We also have some information at the bunker which might be of assistance,” said Alexander.

“We will wait for Irish and Solo to come back and head out after dark. I would rather push our way straight through than spend the night somewhere. Is that okay?” asked Darren.

“Yes, that will be okay. My old body will scream at me once we are finished, but I believe we can make it,” smiled Alexander. “How much longer?”

“They have another half an hour before coming back,” said Darren.

“We could meet them further up the hill here and have their packs ready to move,” said Frank.

“Yeah, I like that idea. Let Christian know our plans and get your things ready to go,” said Darren as he turned back to the small brush pile concealing his pack. Packing up took no time at all since they were all prepared to move at a moment’s notice in any case. In the case of the Germans it was even simpler since they didn’t have all the neat gear the Americans seemed to have. Between the cameras, the thermals, the night vision and the small computer, there were a lot of electronic aids found in the packs of the Americans and the Germans wondered if they still needed to use their eyes and ears for surveillance anymore. But what they didn’t know was the sharp memories of the four Americans and how many times they had played this game before. In England, Scotland, Iceland and all over the North American continent, they had performed the recon missions and recorded vast amounts of information in their minds.

But they would need to wait until they got back to base to download everything and come up with an effective plan. And they still needed to wait for another thirty minutes before Jeremy and Martin returned.

Jeremy was about to bust as he completed his circle around the area and returned to where Martin was waiting. His back teeth were about floating by now and he needed to relieve himself before returning to the patrol base. Stopping in a nearby thicket, he unbuttoned his fly and urinated against a tree, sighing softly at the release of the pressure on his bladder. His Ultimax M115 SAW was slung behind him at that very moment when he completed. Instead of trying to navigate out of the trees with it off his shoulders, he decided to withdraw his pistol with the suppressor instead and exit that way. He checked both ways before leaving and stepped out towards the area Martin was waiting for him.

But five steps out and just as he began to collect his light machine gun, his senses kicked in and he immediately felt like he was not alone. Slowly scanning the area, he found what had set him off. Two IU soldiers were being fairly quiet as they came directly for him through the woods. They didn’t seem very prepared to be on a combat patrol, with rifles slung over their shoulders and one smoking a cigarette. They weren’t making any huge effort to be quiet, but they were

doing so nonetheless. Jeremy raised the pistol and took aim at the two and hoped they might divert their course before coming any closer.

But it was not to be; they were closing the gap rapidly and would be able to detect him at that moment. Deciding to negate the threat and start the ex-filtration, he steadied the Glock 22 and aligned the sights just like he had done countless times before. Jeremy waited until they were within ten meters of him before assuming a firing stance inside of the small bramble.

Time seemed to stand still as he squeezed the trigger twice on the first target and two more times on the second target, hitting center mass each time and the shots muffled down to a barely recognizable sound. Roughly three seconds had passed on the four shots as the bodies hit the ground hard, making far more noise than he wanted to make. Rushing out, he shot two more times into the heads of each to ensure they were down for good. Putting the pistol back into his holster, he unslung the M115 and prepared to move.

And at that moment, the other two members of the small IU patrol came through the area and saw him. Shouting a command in Arabic, they started to unslung their rifles as Jeremy darted into the undergrowth.

CHAPTER 11 – GAME PLANS

Date/Time: 15 March/0621

Location: Near Dierschied, Occupied Germany

The two remaining IU soldiers gave chase to Jeremy as he ran through the dense underbrush away from the area, shouting at him to stop. They could barely pick out his retreating form in the early morning gray so common before dawn, but knew he didn't belong where he happened to be at. Jeremy made no attempts to be silent at this point, but wanted to bring them closer to his team and the Germans where they could ambush them. He hoped Martin was paying attention to the noise and would handle the problem in due time.

Martin had already known something was up and radioed the contact report to Darren and received an acknowledgement. As Jeremy came past him, Martin engaged the two soldiers with his M-4 and had the suppressor attached to the end of the barrel. The rounds impacting and the bodies dropping made just about as much noise as the weapons did themselves. Jeremy dropped behind an available tree behind Martin and got his weapon ready to fire in case any more came along. While the light machine gun wasn't suppressed, they would need the rate of fire far more than silence.

"Clear," said Martin in a normal tone to Jeremy who was looking back to where he had come from. Martin stood up and went to the soldiers, finding both of them dead. They were joined by Darren and Frank along with the two Germans who had scampered up to the site.

"Do you know what you just did?" asked Alexander.

"Yes, we took down a threat," said Martin.

"Yes, and this is not a bad thing. But we need to move now," said Alexander.

"Why?" asked Darren.

"Trust me, I will explain later, but we need to leave now," said Alexander as he gave orders to the remainder of the group. None of the Americans argued the point and returned to gather their packs from the patrol base. After they traveled almost two hundred meters away from the site of the ambush, they heard two distinctive bursts from an AK style weapon from the area. It urged them forward faster to the patrol base as they heard two more bursts further up.

Gathering the packs and gear, they quickly got ready to move and waited on Christian and Alexander to return to the base of operations. When they returned, they were running and quickly gathered what gear they could and changed magazines before giving the follow me signal. The team rapidly departed the area with the Germans in the lead and rear, following a direct route towards the highway. They moved at a quick pace, making far more noise than planned and far more than on their way in. It was also daylight now and they knew their pathway could be tracked much easier than at nighttime.

When they were three kilometers from their patrol base, but still in the forest, they took a quick security halt and gathered everyone up to check to see what happened. They checked each other to ensure everyone had the gear they were responsible for and nothing was left behind. During that time, Jeremy told his tale

“I came across two of the IU soldiers on patrol near the base. I stopped to take a whiz and the first two came out of nowhere before I had a chance to hide. I managed to get those two silently, but the other two gave chase. Martin took down the other two as they came after me. I have no idea why the Germans gave away our position,” said Jeremy.

“We did it because we do not have silent weapons. If the IU was to find bodies with gunshot wounds and not having heard gunfire, they would become suspicious. We needed to make it look like we were responsible for the killing of their soldiers,” said Alexander.

“So you did it to cover our tracks?” asked Frank.

“Yes, we ambush their soldiers from time to time and they know we are responsible. If they did not hear gunfire, they would have started looking harder for who was responsible,” said Alexander.

“Our mistake,” said Frank. “Maybe we should have brought AKs instead of our issue weapons.”

“Hindsight, but for now, we need to clear out. Did we get enough data to get a strike going?” asked Darren.

“I think we have enough between the four of us and what the Germans can give us. It has to be enough since they are probably alerted now,” said Martin.

“True and we will have to draw attention away from this area somehow. But for now we need to focus on getting back to the bunker,” said Darren.

“Direct route back?” asked Jeremy.

“Probably so. I’m thinking heading right back and skipping the safe house might be our best bet. What do you guys think?” asked Jeremy.

“We already came to that conclusion, but we will have to make a longer trip to stay within the cover of the forest on our way back,” said Alexander.

“How much are we talking about?” asked Frank.

Alexander and Christian had a minor side conversation quickly in German, ending with Christian making a short comment and shrugging his shoulders. Apparently, he and Alexander came to an agreement on what they had been talking about.

“Maybe up to ten kilometers if we want to stay hidden. But we think we might head back to the farmhouse just in case,” said Alexander.

“Will the family let us in again?” asked Darren.

“They should not have a problem doing so, but we will have to approach the town in the daylight,” said Alexander.

“That’s a huge gamble. Anyone can see us and call us in,” said Martin.

“But I think that might be our best option. What kind of route are we looking at?” asked Darren as they gathered around the map.

“We can come out of the forest here near Naurath and cross the open field. It will take us closer to the old army barracks, but they are abandoned and except for an occasional checkpoint, the IU ignores it. There is a paved road here, but crossing it should be easy since it is surrounded by the woods. We continue and cross the L46 highway somewhere here,” said Alexander, pointing at the paper map. “It is a steep bank along this area, but otherwise is fairly easy to navigate. We continue directly west and then north towards the house. Christian or I will make the approach to the house and check to see if everything is okay.”

“Time and terrain?” asked Frank.

“Maybe three, four hours tops. Terrain is difficult, but manageable. Tougher for them than us,” said Alexander.

“The map shows roads cutting right through this area. What about those?” asked Jeremy.

“Mainly old forest roads, I think you Americans call them logging roads. Mostly not used, but still serviceable,” said Alexander.

“And the forest?” asked Jeremy.

“Fairly dense, but not so dense you cannot walk through it. We should be fine,” said Alexander.

“Have you been here before?” asked Darren.

“Not in a while, maybe last year?” said Alexander who asked Christian the same question. Christian replied in German while pointing at the map. “He says the area was once cleared, but should be okay. Lots of plants on the ground and small trees.”

“Let’s make a decision and get moving. I don’t like being out in the daylight like this,” said Frank.

“Agreed. Radio the contact to base and let them know we are planning to stop at the farm house right now and will contact them later on when we know for certain,” said Darren to Martin.

The group set off once again, traveling at an accelerated pace, but still going slow enough to detect an ambush. They would slow even more once they were around five kilometers from the site of the bunker and in relatively safer territory.

“No choice, we have to take them out,” whispered the pilot.

“Hadn’t planned on tracking dogs being used,” said the co-pilot.

“Take the people first, then the dogs. Hopefully their communications are bad because of the terrain and they won’t be noticed as missing for a while,” said the pilot to the DSO and the co-pilot who had the longer ranged MP7s.

“Should we get their packs?” asked the co-pilot.

“Might not hurt since we are short on supplies and weapons. Make it look like a resistance band?” asked the OSO.

“I think that might not be a bad idea,” said the DSO.

“Okay, we will get down closer to the area. When they get in range, open fire and take them out,” said the pilot, not used to performing ground combat. They were all perfectly content to view the action from thirty thousand feet while dropping bombs on the enemy below. Infantry combat was for the birds...

Darren and his team made good time getting to the first roadway and crossing over it, even in daylight. But the second roadway posed a serious challenge.

“I know you said there was an embankment, but you did not say it was almost a sheer cliff!” exclaimed Darren.

“Well, it’s not bad once you get going down as long as you do not slip. Getting up the other side shouldn’t be a problem either. The deer do it all the time,” said Alexander.

“If you hadn’t noticed, we don’t have four legs and are not quite as nimble as deer are,” said Frank sarcastically.

“Well, it can be done. One goes across and lets down a rope for the others. Cross singly instead of in pairs,” said Alexander.

“We could go a long way out of our way looking for another way down boss,” said Jeremy.

“Much as I hate to admit it, I think we will have to do it right here,” said Darren. “Who goes first?”

“I was the one that led you here, I should go first,” said Alexander.

Christian interrupted him in German and pointed at his chest. He pulled a length of old nylon rope out of his pack for the other side and handed off the pack to Alexander. He grabbed his AKM and prepared to go down the side of the embankment by the roadway. Looking both directions, he saw it was clear and half slid and half scampered down the embankment. Once on the roadway, he darted across and quickly started up the other side. He slid a few times in the loose mud of the embankment, but made it up in good time. From their position, they could see him start to tie off the rope and start to let it down the embankment. It was short, but not impossible to reach in their current state. They would have to climb about ten feet before getting to the rope, but then it would be easy to get the rest of the way up since it was something they had practiced several times in the past.

“Why don’t you go next? We’ve all been trained in scaling up cliffs using a rope before,” said Darren to Alexander.

“Don’t mind if I do,” smiled Alexander as he prepared to slide/crawl down the embankment. Again, the roadway was checked and nothing was amiss at this moment. He had double his normal weight since he was also carrying Christian’s pack as well. Darren had served a double purpose since Alexander would be slowed than his team and he didn’t want to be split up that much. Once the others started going, he knew they would move quickly. Alexander finally reached the bottom and ran across the roadway to the other side. He had a hard time getting his footing, but finally reached the end of the rope and started pulling himself up, hand over hand. Christian was at the top to lend a hand when he reached close enough.

“Irish, then Solo, then Frank and I will bring up the rear,” said Darren as Jeremy got ready to cross over. Going down they were not faster than the previous two, but going up the other side was a little quicker since they had practiced it before. Jeremy was up the other side before they knew it. Martin was the next up and got down the embankment a different way since they were starting to create a trail through the mud on the side of the road. Once on the other side, he prepared to go up the side when a vehicle approached from the opposite direction.

Darren quickly gave the “danger close” hand and arm signal to the other side and Jeremy in turn gave it to Martin. Knowing he couldn’t get up quick enough, he pushed off the side and swung to his left behind a small bush growing out of the side of the hill. Placing his feet in the ground, he slid as best as he could behind the bush, hoping to conceal himself. From the other side, Darren could see a vague outline of his body and hoped the vehicle approaching wasn’t paying much attention.

It was a single vehicle traveling down the road, but an IU vehicle at that. An unarmored supply truck, it did have one advantage over the group in the form of a pintle mounted PKM machine gun. And the gunner was paying somewhat close attention to his surroundings. He saw what appeared to be a human form in the bushes on the embankment and banged on the roof of the truck, shouting in Arabic. The truck started screeching to a halt as the gunner started pulling the turret over to the left to engage the spectral form in the bushes.

At once, the entire team opened up with Jeremy engaging the gunner with his light machine gun along with Alexander and Christian engaging the passenger in the vehicle. Darren and Frank both fired on the driver of the vehicle. They chose not to fire on the rear of the truck just in case there were explosives that might explode under the gunfire. All in all, it was a textbook example of a hasty improvised ambush.

“CLEAR!” shouted Frank from their position.

Alexander took one more shot at the passenger who was moaning softly before announcing “CLEAR!”

“GET UP THERE NOW!” shouted Darren to Martin who needed little prompting. He quickly scaled the rest of the embankment to the top. Instead of continuing their crossing separately, Darren and Frank decided to get across at the same time and risk further vehicles coming down the road. As they passed by the vehicle, Alexander shouted at them.

“Check the vehicle for weapons and ammunition! Make it look like we were the ones hitting it!” he shouted from the top of the embankment.

Knowing they were probably better off grabbing what they could in thirty seconds, they heeded the advice of Alexander and grabbed what was immediately available. AK magazines were tossed into their patrol packs and the two rifles in the cab of the vehicle were grabbed. The PKM was a total loss since two rounds had punctured the receiver during the brief firefight. They took a look at the rear of the truck and found it was empty. Finishing up, they quickly got to the other side and started climbing side by side, but Frank reached the rope first. Darren continued to climb as Frank quickly outpaced him now he had help. Once at the top, he swung the rope over to Darren and the entire team pulled as he climbed.

Once at the top, Christian quickly undid the rope and started rolling it back up while moving away from the roadway. The rest of the recon party quickly followed his lead since they knew there was greater danger in staying behind than moving at a faster pace going away. Before leaving, Alexander tossed an IU white phosphorus grenade at the truck and hoped it would catch the rest on fire. His aim was not off as the grenade sailed gently into the cab before exploding its contents inside the cab and starting to burn everything inside down to the metal.

Once the patrol reached a half a kilometer away from the roadway, they called a brief halt and gathered up, all facing out except Darren who was in the middle of the group.

“Does this change our plans for going to the house?” asked Darren.

“No, it shouldn’t. The town is far enough away that the IU probably wouldn’t search there,” said Alexander.

“Probably shouldn’t?” asked Martin.

“Nothing is guaranteed with them,” admitted Alexander.

“So what do we do?” asked Darren.

“I think you could take the chance at staying at the house. Remember, we have been hiding from the IU for many years in the bottoms of houses,” said Alexander.

“You think we should take the risk?” asked Darren.

“It is acceptable. The IU will be watching the roads and trails more than the towns with the two incidents we have had here recently,” said Alexander.

“Okay, we go ahead as planned,” said Darren, but still not entirely comfortable with the enroute stop.

“Okay, what did we get?” asked the co-pilot when the other two got back. Two quick bursts from the MP7s had done their job efficiently and killed both the IU soldiers and the dogs they had with them.

“Looks to be two AKs, a pistol, magazines and web gear. We don’t know what else is in the packs yet. But for the moment, I think we need to get moving,” said the pilot.

“Yeah, these things are a bit louder than I remembered. You need some help with that?” asked the DSO.

“No, I can handle it. It’s not heavy,” said the OSO who was shouldering the small pack taken off the dead IU soldier.

“Directly east, right towards that tower right there,” said the pilot after checking the compass. They still had quite a bit of walking to do.

Frank called a halt as they neared the edge of the woods near Zemmer. He could plainly see the house they had stayed at before and could see the older woman working in the back yard tilling the ground by hand. The older gentleman was not to be seen at that moment and not unexpectedly, the two younger women were hidden from view as well. They observed the area for a few minutes and eventually determined Alexander knew what he was talking about since there didn't seem to be any IU present in the town. Again, Alexander dropped all his gear along with his rifle, but placed the pistol in the small of his back. Shedding the uniform top he was carrying, he was wearing a brown sweater underneath and looked remarkably like the others they could see in the town. The major difference was the camouflage pants he was wearing, but as long as he remained in the tall grass, that wouldn't present a problem either.

They watched intently as he walked the two hundred meters between their position and the house. When he arrived, they saw him raise his hands to his waist and begin speaking. They couldn't hear what he was saying, but apparently he was having an animated conversation with the woman in the backyard. Unknowing of whether or not she was going to allow the team to rest until that night when they could move out once again, they continued to wait as they watched Alexander continue to talk to the woman. She defiantly put her hands on her hips and the remainder saw this as not too good a sign. But eventually, they saw her nod and knew it was possible for them to stay once again. Now the only problem was getting to the house under cover. Alexander walked back to the trees, looking over his shoulder from time to time and not on a direct path to the team. He eventually got into the woods and walked over to Darren who was waiting patiently.

"She says it is okay to stay here again until the dark and rest. She is not happy with it, but agreed to do it," said Alexander.

"So how do we get from here to there without being seen?" asked Frank.

"Easy enough, we just walk out in plain sight," said Alexander.

"Are you crazy?" exclaimed Darren.

"No, the woman assures me there are no IU forces in the area. She said they came through earlier, but have since left," said Alexander.

"And this assures me how?" asked Darren.

"Because she would not lie to me about this, she is my cousin," said Alexander.

"Okay, that works, but what about the neighbors?" asked Darren.

"The neighbors are on our side as well. None of them report to the IU," said Alexander.

"And how do you know this?" asked Frank.

“The ones that did were taken care of a long time ago,” said Alexander simply and not explaining what ‘taken care of’ meant in this case. They all knew exactly what it meant.

“Are you positive?” asked Darren.

“Absolutely,” said Alexander.

Darren weighed the option of staying in place and trying to rest up until dark or walking into the village once again to stay. While they would probably be okay where they were at, it would be safer and more comfortable in the house. So he made the decision to move on, but also to consult the group before moving. He knew where Alexander stood, but the remainder of the team was unknown. And while he might have been the ranking member of the team, they would make this decision together.

“Anyone have any objections to getting into the house quickly and crashing for about six hours before moving on?” asked Darren.

“I think we could risk it before moving this evening,” said Martin.

“I’m thinking we stay in place and head out once it is dark,” said Jeremy.

“Head to the house. It provides the best concealment for the day, but if the IU wants to search, we will be trapped,” said Frank. “But overall, the house is the best option.”

“Can you live with the decision to stay in the house?” asked Darren.

“Yeah, the group thinks it’s the best option, I can go with that,” said Jeremy.

“Why don’t you think it would be good?” asked Darren.

“For the exact reason Demo said. In case the IU wants to search, we will be trapped,” said Jeremy.

“Risk assessment?” asked Darren.

“Minimal, just letting you know what I was thinking,” said Jeremy.

“Let’s do it then,” said Darren. “How do we get there from here?”

“Easy, direct line out of the forest to the house. They are waiting for us,” said Alexander.

“Let’s do it,” said Darren as he prepared to move.

The team got ready to run from the forest to the house and get inside quickly. None were sure of what would happen, they all said a silent prayer before dashing out and running the two hundred meters across the open field to the house. Once there, they dashed through the door inside,

crashing into each other as they crammed into the small kitchen. Once the six were inside, they kept a close eye out just in case, but relaxed somewhat.

“Please tell them thank you for the hospitality once again,” said Darren while looking at the older gentleman.

Alexander translated it and received a polite nod in return from the German. The door to the basement was opened once again and the team walked down the stairs, shedding gear as they went and found the same accommodations they had before. A watch was set, much like before and the team planned on staying for eight hours before moving out once again. It would put them in the bunker after dawn the next morning, but the movement enroute to the site would mainly be at night. And again, they relaxed slightly.

The trucks came to a screeching stop in the middle of the town and at least two platoons of IU soldiers spilled out into the surrounding area. The house had somewhat of a direct line into the center of town and Christian saw the infantry getting out of the trucks. He had been in the kitchen conversing with the older man when the trucks showed up. They both sprung into action with Christian going one way and the man going another. Christian dashed to the staircase leading into the basement and shouted at the occupants inside.

“*ACHTUNG! ACHTUNG!*” shouted Christian as the remainder of the team grabbed at weapons that were all within arm’s reach. The two younger ladies were sent to the basement as Darren dashed to the top of the stairs. When he arrived, he and Christian saw the soldiers were beginning to start searching and sweeping the town. Several doors were kicked in and soldiers disappeared inside. Furthermore, a squad was heading directly for them...

CHAPTER 12 – INDICATORS

Date/Time: 15 March/1529

Location: Zemmer, Occupied Germany

Weapons were quickly gathered and web gear put on. They decided against their packs for the moment except for a few minor items and would rely solely on the gear they carried in the various pouches and pockets of their webbing if they had to evade on foot. Darren could see the squad of soldiers moving down the street towards the few houses on this block. While a squad would be fairly easy to deal with even with his six personnel, the 14.5mm machine gun on top of the BTR-80 that rumbled up behind them would not be so easy to deal with since it was encased in protective armor. Darren could see the gunner behind it, looking around at the various soldiers kicking in doors and doing what occupation troops did best.

“Going to be hard to take that vehicle out of play,” said Darren as Frank joined him.

Frank peered through the scope at the vehicle and even though distorted by the glass of the window could see the shot would be difficult. “Not going to be easy. There is a firing slit on top, but I’m not sure if I can hit the gunner through that.”

“Running out of time,” said Alexander as he saw the soldiers stop for a moment and then continue their walk towards the house.

“Okay, we hit the squad of soldiers and get out of the house through the window on the side facing the woods. Fire off a smoke grenade in the street and hope it gives us enough concealment to get out of here. We should have enough cover to get to the woods before the APC gets here since it has to turn around. Hit the woods and head south, then west until we hit the river and play it by ear from there. Agreed?” asked Darren.

“You won’t have any complaints from me,” said Frank as he departed to let the rest of the team know.

“I will inform the family. We should take them with us and find them a place of safety. I mean, it was us who brought this trouble here,” said Alexander.

“Go,” was all Darren said with a jerk of his head, not taking his eyes off the soldiers.

The rest of the team came up and quickly peeked at the approaching soldiers. They all knew the primary missions of their weapons, machine gunners would take on machine gunners and grenadiers would take grenadiers, so on and so forth. They didn’t want to fight, but could give the enemy platoons a pretty bloody nose if they gave chase.

Christian and Martin had already gone to the rear of the house with the family and explained to them what would happen. The window was opened and the family ready to drop out at the first

shot that rang out. The two would get them to the woods while the rest of the team held off the squad and in turn the rest of the soldiers. Once in the woods, they would provide a base of fire for the remainder of the team until they could get to the woods and continue out of danger.

And the moment was almost on them. The soldiers stopped right in front of the house, pausing for a moment until a Sergeant pointed at the house catty-corner to theirs and closer to the village. They backtracked for twenty meters and kicked the door in without knocking first. Shouts and screams were heard from the inside and something broke along the way. The team collectively held their breath while the IU soldiers continued their pillage of the house, eventually coming out seven minutes later carrying food and what appeared to be something valuable in a bag.

And the scene repeated itself in the small town. Soldiers came out of houses carrying food and valuables from the various houses they had looted. Several shots and screams were heard, but no wounded Germans came out of the houses they could see. After a half an hour, the IU soldiers seemed content with accomplishing their mission of “searching” and started to mount up in their vehicles to leave. It took another ten minutes to get everyone loaded to include the items they had stolen from the homes before the diesel engines roared to life and the short company of troops departed the town.

“Close call,” said Darren as he exhaled long and loud.

“It has been the same for quite some time. We hit a convoy or one of their bases; they retaliate by searching the nearest villages and taking things from the homes. This one was not that bad since they left in a somewhat short time. The residents are used to this,” said Alexander.

Darren was not sure how to act or respond. They had dealt with invaders immediately after the Fall at the Ranch, but it was simple then. Kill or be killed and no hesitation on that. He had no idea what it was like to live each and every day under the boot of an occupier and hoped he would never have to learn what that was like. This minor taste of what was going on was far more than enough for him and he knew he would rather die resisting against an invasion force than live under their supervision. “Is the family okay?”

“Yes, they are okay and they do not blame you. Again, they are used to this happening,” said Alexander.

“We need to get out of here as soon as it gets dark,” said Jeremy as soon as he dropped his pack.

“Way ahead of you on that. We leave as soon as we possibly can. Until then, tell everyone to try to get some rest,” said Darren.

“Yeah, as soon as our sphincter gets untangled we might catch a catnap,” chuckled Jeremy as they went back to the basement.

Frank stuck around to talk to Darren for a moment before trying to catch some shuteye himself. “I think we made a mistake in stopping here instead of in the forest,” he said.

“I was thinking the same thing right after it happened. We were all tired and not really making good decisions. It was a mistake and we hopefully can learn from it without getting ourselves into hot water next time,” said Darren.

“Well, don’t feel so bad. We all agreed to it except maybe Jeremy. But like you said, lesson learned,” said Frank.

“Go get a nap. We have a long walk ahead of us tonight. And we go straight through,” said Darren. Alexander came out of the kitchen and wandered over to Darren.

“I have talked to the family. They do not hold us accountable for those animals coming here. But I know it was because we destroyed the truck on the road coming here,” said Alexander. “Maybe if I had picked a different route we would not have encountered the truck.”

“And maybe we would have run into a platoon of troops out on patrol had we picked a different path. Don’t go second guessing yourself,” said Darren, who had been doing exactly the same thing before.

“You are our guests here. It would be bad form to have you get killed because of decisions we have made,” said Alexander.

“Things happen. Will the IU put out any patrols to try and track us?” asked Darren.

“Maybe. I am not sure how many will be available. Most will be sent looking for the downed bomber crew. These airmen carry a greater price than us simple resistance fighters. The Muslims are used to us hitting targets of opportunity and have become...I do not remember the English word. Used to us being here?” asked Alexander.

“Complacent,” said Darren.

“That is the one. Complacent to us doing such things. But just the same, they may put out trackers and hunters looking for us,” said Alexander.

“Best way of getting them off our trail?” asked Darren.

“Go north towards the base before going back west. It will appear we are going towards the base to strike. But I think it is best that we travel quickly and get back to the bunker,” said Alexander.

“Agreed. Want to help me with the route?” asked Darren.

Darren and Alexander went over a route plan for getting back to the bunker. It was a little longer route than they had taken to get there, but offered more safety. They would head directly north through the woods and cut above the town of Speicher, splitting it and Beilingen before turning back to the west. Their path would take them close to the same path Thomas and Amber had taken when they had transmitted their message.

Darren and Alexander kept a continued vigil while the others tried to nap along the way. They were used to tense situations now and were able to turn off their rush not long after and get sleep when they could. They still didn't feel safe, but knew they would be out in the open where they could fight more effectively as soon as it got dark. They didn't prefer to be bottled up like this, much like they had been in Texas and North Carolina during the invasion of North America by the IU. But soon enough, they would be heading out and back into the forest where their tactics excelled.

The Major in charge of the intelligence unit at Spangdahlem looked at the ambush site along the roadway. The burned out truck had not been moved back to the base yet but still sat at the side of the road where it had been pushed off to allow other traffic to continue south and north along the roadway. He peered at the sides of the embankment and saw the pathway that had been created by the ambushers along the way. Not a great pathway and would be entirely missed by passing traffic, but clear as day once one took the time to look for it.

He went to one side and took hold of the rope that had been dropped by the security unit to assist in those climbing either side. Climbing was fairly easy as he kept himself in shape, but for others it might have been a problem. *Problem enough for the insurgents in the local area? Possibly so. Trouble for a special operations team I suspect of being in the local area? No problem whatsoever,* he thought to himself as he walked along the edge towards the three soldiers standing over something they had found.

"We found shell casings, sir. Small piles of spent brass," said a senior sergeant in charge of the detail securing the area.

"What kind of rounds were they?" asked the Major.

"We did not disturb them enough to find out. Our orders were to mark the find and contact someone in a position of authority when we did find something. But one of the teams did not get the orders in time and picked up the brass on the other side of the road," said the sergeant.

"Show me where," ordered the Major.

The sergeant led him to an area somewhat densely covered with ground vegetation and saw where the ground had been matted somewhat. Or someone had moved the ground cover aside when they crawled forward. Only small signs of it since it did not appear they had been there long before the ambush was sprung. At other ambush sites, the ground was typically matted heavily and more traces could be seen of activity. But in this place, it did not appear to have been the case.

"Either they were not here long or the truck interrupted the crossing of an insurgent cell in the local area," said the Major, not really asking a question, but the sergeant taking it that way.

“We do not know, sir. Here is the brass,” said the sergeant as he pointed away from the matted area.

A small pile of 5.56mm brass was seen, evidence of Jeremy’s machine gun fire on the truck. Additionally, two small piles of 7.62x39mm were found nearby. “There was also brass on the other side, but had been disturbed by the time we found it,” said the sergeant as he pulled out the small 5.56mm casings from Darren’s carbine. The single 7.62mm casing fired by Frank had yet to be found.

The Major looked at the casings and saw they were the same for all the weapons. The standard FNC rifle, carbine and light machine gun rounds didn’t have any identifying marks on them save the “5.56x45mm” stamped on the base of the brass. *Like I expected them to leave me a large sign that says they were here. Too many things lately are piling up and indicate one thing*, he thought as he pocketed the brass and told the sergeant to clear the scene.

“Our patrols are still in the nearby towns searching for insurgent activity. Would you like an escort to one of the sweeps?” asked the sergeant.

“And these are the same troops that have become fat and lazy in this virtual paradise of an assignment?” asked the Major.

“Yes, sir. They are,” said the sergeant meekly.

“Did you put out trackers or scouts onto the trail here?” asked the Major.

“Sir, most are involved to the north of here looking for the crew of that downed bomber. We had one tracker team, but lost the trail after about a half a kilometer. They are still searching to pick it back up,” said the sergeant.

“And the other side? Did you manage to find out where they came from?” asked the Major.

“It appears they came from the northeast and crossed here. They actually came close to the old German Army barracks near here from what the tracking team told me before continuing on the other side of the road,” said the sergeant.

“And from there?” asked the Major.

“They could not tell sir. They said the trail was very faint and they had a hard time following it in any case,” admitted the sergeant.

“I want you and this squad to remain on scene. I will be sending you additional reinforcements and other tracking teams. I want to know where they came from and where they were going. It is obvious they crossed the road here, but why here instead of a few kilometers up or down the road? Did the team from Zemmer check in?” asked the Major.

“I heard some radio traffic indicating they had completed and were heading back to the base, Major. But if they found anything, I do not know,” said the sergeant who wondered why the Major was getting so worked up over a simple insurgent cell.

“Our people have become far too complacent in this area. The resistance is still very dangerous and these air strikes embolden them to strike more. Keep your eyes open sergeant if you want to live to see your family again,” warned the Major as he got back into the light truck to go back to the base. A younger member of his staff would be typing up the contact report as he had a bigger report to file. Something wasn’t right to him and he did not what the indicators were pointing to. He would prepare the report and schedule a meeting with the General commanding the troops in the area.

It was dark again and everyone had been fed before leaving. They were down to only two meals now and would need to resupply soon. Water wasn’t a concern since the house had running water for the moment. But of course this could change rather quickly if the IU followed standard practice, which would be to deny the town water and other basic services for a period until things calmed down once again.

The group gathered up and shouldered their packs along with their weapons. They would be traveling around the village closer to the roadway than they were comfortable with, but would eventually get back into the forest and behind serious cover. Again, traveling after dark was not ideal since it denied them the possibility of long range vision, but they had their night vision to offset that disadvantage.

They had a long haul ahead of them and needed to make the best time possible. But it was growing cold once again as the sky was starting to clear and the temperatures were dropping. While this would sap their energy, it would also make the IU troops possibly sitting out on ambushes more likely to be cold, miserable and not focusing on their job. Darren checked the small thermometer he always carried and saw the temperature was down to twenty-five degrees already. He didn’t know what the wind chill was or would be by the time they finished, but he knew cold weather injuries might set in if they spent any additional time outside.

Security halts were taken, but were brief affairs where the members sipped at water from their hydration packs to keep the water from freezing in the tubes and ate a little bit of this or that on the go. They all wanted to keep moving to stay warm. The thermal base layers they wore knocked off most of the chill and watch caps were dug out to help hold the heat on their head. The Germans didn’t have the luxury of the synthetic base layers like the Americans did, but were offered the use of some. They politely turned them down and showed the thick wool sweaters they both wore that kept them warm for the moment.

But the cold was taking its toll. Feet were dragging a little more, their vision not so sharp and their hearing was started to become impaired from the constant wind. They were not quite as

focused as they could have been and they all knew it. A small group of evergreen trees was found in the woods they were currently marching through and Darren decided on another halt even though the last one was only fifteen minutes prior.

“Demo, check the area and see just how well this can be seen from the outside,” said Darren as he pulled alongside Frank.

“Roger boss,” said Frank as he took off on his own to look at the trees from a variety of distances. He knew Darren would be concerned with light and noise discipline and knew he was calling a halt for one reason. He checked and saw the area was pretty well covered with dense evergreen trees that concealed the interior from outside observation very well. The other members of the team had already gone inside the small copse of trees in the middle of the hardwood forest and had completely disappeared from sight. He checked it from various angles and found nothing could be seen from the outside. But even so, he knew Darren would be playing it safe by putting additional cover out while they warmed up. He walked all the way out to a hundred meters and the trees looked entirely normal from this range. An old path was crossed, but it did not look like it had seen recent activity since the snow on top was still undisturbed. He looked behind him and saw he was creating a path through the patchy snow. It bothered him a little, but he knew these things were just something that was and had to be dealt with. But even so, the tracks would lead a person right down their path if they wanted to follow them. He would inform Darren of this problem once he returned.

He returned to the designated rally point, trying to take the path that had the most snow melted. Frozen leaves and small branches crunched under his feet as he went along, making far more noise than he was accustomed to. But still, the noise would be somewhat trapped by the vegetation surrounding him and would not be noticeable a hundred meters away. He found the most likely entry point in the trees and started trying wiggle inside. It wasn't easy as the evergreens overlapped quite a bit and he heard a voice from inside near the ground.

“Get down on the ground and crawl through. It's the only way in,” whispered Martin. He could have challenged Frank, but he saw he was alone and recognized him from the night vision he wore. Another minor slip in the cold. Another problem facing the team was the lack of batteries. They were starting to run low on the kind that powered their night vision along with their weapons scopes, radios, GPS and handheld computers. Some of the items they could do without like the weapon scopes could be replaced by the backup iron sights they all had, but others, like the radios were priceless. Martin knew Darren would be taking an account of the items they had left and if he didn't, Martin would mention it to him.

Frank was already far enough in that it was a problem trying to get through. He was somewhat stuck inside the two trees and couldn't really move easily without making a lot of noise. But he dropped his pack and got to the ground as best as he could, not trying to disturb the branches any more than he needed to. It was a small telltale of their position, but they still tried to mitigate everything they could while taking the extended break. Once inside he took a position update from the GPS and found they were only a few hundred meters from the area where they would exit the forest. Frank knew Darren was smart enough to stop now and warm up while they were still under cover rather than try to continue on and risk the entire team from cold injuries.

Once inside, he saw the area opened up a little with trees somewhat missing their lower branches. The largest opening was about five feet and Jeremy was busy clearing other branches away by sawing at them with a small saw on his Leatherman. It was almost noiseless as he continued to saw, happy for the work to keep him warm. Christian and Martin on security, peeking out from under the branches while Darren and Alexander were putting together a small lightweight camp stove. They would not risk building a fire, but Frank knew they were going to be preparing some of the hot soups in their emergency kits. And hot food was warmth, both in the form of the hot liquids warming them up and by the calorie intake. Typically the emergency food kits were the last items to be eaten since they tasted horrible, but in this case, they would be happy for them.

“Need some help?” asked Frank in a whisper.

“Yeah, grab my poncho liner from my pack and help Jeremy rig up some sort of canopy to put over this thing,” said Darren, who was clearly slipping as well since he referred to Jeremy by name instead of call sign. The cold and fatigue were sapping them all.

“Remind me of that winter storm a long time ago. The one Warbucks, Grumpy, Tattoo and Glamour got stuck in,” said Frank.

“Yeah, the one we thought they were dead and we come to find out they made out better than we did?” chuckled Darren.

Frank took one of the branches and grabbed his sheath knife on his belt. It was a handmade affair made for him by Mark Williams a long time ago when they were still at the Ranch. Christmas presents were often made by the resident and Mark had a knack for metalworking. For some of the gifts, he had taken from the old springs of a car and crafted them into something special after hours of work on a fire and anvil. It was something Frank would not have traded the world for. He started cutting away the smaller branches from the tree, but carefully stacking them nearby so the security could have something underneath them to lie on between them and the cold ground. Martin was continuing to cut away larger pieces and came to the same conclusion. The sap inside the branches wasn’t frozen yet and smelled a little more than usual. But hopefully, not for long.

Once they got the five stakes they needed, Frank grabbed the poncho liner from Darren’s pack. It was a digital woodland color and often supplemented the sleeping bag on colder nights. Tonight, it would be used to conceal the light from the stove and hopefully muffle some of the sound as well. Like any liquid fuel stove, the jet the fuel sprayed out of to ignite was often loud, far louder than they were comfortable with. Improvements had been made over the years, but they were still louder than they were comfortable with in the dark woods.

He and Jeremy managed to lash up the poles and get the liner covering the small area. The light of the flames priming the stove could be seen and Frank worried about the heat rising and melting the Thinsulate and nylon material. But the stove primed up quickly and the dull glow of the jets could be seen. But the jets were hardly heard.

“Something new?” asked Frank as Darren appeared from underneath the poncho liner, leaving Alexander underneath to warm up.

“Yeah, new stove and jets made by that new company in Arkansas...Standard Metallic I think. Some new design that keeps the roaring down to a minimum. I figured this would be the best test, but I tried it out in England a few times. Works well enough, but a little heavier than most,” said Darren.

“As bad as the Primus used to be?” asked Frank.

“No, not quite that bad. But you have to admit, those Primus’ were built like tanks. But I think the designers took some of the ideas from Primus and built their own stoves,” said Darren. He knew Thomas had eventually given up his MSR Dragonfly and relied solely on the Primus Omnifuel now since it was virtually bulletproof and ran off almost anything flammable. But the down side was weight. But trading reliability for weight was sometimes necessary and you carried what you were comfortable with. But the stove had survived since they went to Texas and didn’t really show the abuse normally associated with a piece of equipment that had been in combat off and on since then. But of course, the Primus factory in Sweden was now in IU hands and had been idle since the invasion.

Alexander could be heard underneath putting a small pot on top of the stove to heat some water for the soup. It was instant so mixing it up would be little trouble. All that was required now was for the water to boil. Jeremy had been busy giving out the branches to the two on security and having spread them out on the ground. It made it slightly more comfortable, but more would be needed for efficient padding. And they knew they were not going to be there that long.

“Go ahead and dig your cup out. I’m sure you won’t mind if we share?” asked Frank.

“No, I don’t think your cooties will kill me,” chuckled Darren as he got his canteen cup out of the pouch. The ageless stainless steel cup that nested inside of a one quart canteen had dutifully served American forces in one form or another since World War One. And obviously someone didn’t feel the need to screw up a good thing and the cups were again being produced for the FNC forces. Others had already dug into their survival kits and gotten the soup out and Martin his own canteen cup. Since the Germans didn’t have the packets available, two more were added into the pile. Frank took the spot of Martin and told him to get under the cover and get warm. He was visibly shivering and Frank knew he needed the heat more than the others in their group. As they continued their longer halt, they all wondered how long it was going to take to get back to the bunker.

Thomas looked outside and saw the frost was no longer forming. They couldn’t see the sky for the trees, but from the looks of things, it was well below freezing at that moment. He knew frost

wouldn't form in colder temperatures and worried about the team that was on their way back. They had received the initial report from Darren about the unplanned ex-fil from the site, but had heard nothing since then.

"Know what the temperature is out there?" he asked one of the Germans, Michael Lange. He spoke just enough English to be understood, but understood more than he could speak. He asked the question in German to the gathered crew in the command center and received a reply.

"They say, ummm, *minus elf, verstehen?*" asked Michael.

"Elf is eleven if I recall. Celsius or Fahrenheit?" asked Thomas.

"Celsius," answered Michael.

Thomas tried to do the conversion in his head and couldn't come up with the correct answer. But he remembered a simple way of doing things for temperature conversions from Celsius to Fahrenheit. He didn't feel like firing up the small computer just to figure out the exact conversion so he tried to remember what the formula was. *Double the Celsius and add thirty-two would get you to within the ball park of the temperature under a certain amount. So minus eleven doubled makes minus twenty-two...adding in the positive thirty two gives me ten degrees Fahrenheit. Probably a degree or two off, but either way, that's cold,* he thought and added his mental notes for Michael Lange. "A little cold out there."

"Ja," answered Michael softly. He was worried about his friends as well. Alexander was a fairly popular man, putting others at ease with his good sense of humor and steadfast determination for the cause. They would be seriously hurt if something was to happen to him.

Thomas saw it was coming up on the end of his shift and went to wake Greg for his turn. As usual, he was in a mood at being woken up. He grumbled before sitting up on the bunk. "What? No coffee to greet me in bed? You had better get your butt back to the command center and get me a cup before you come in here like this," he said grumpily, but Thomas knew he was just joking.

"Do I look like Amy?" kidded Thomas who knew the two were involved on a romantic level. Amy was one of the few people on the face of the earth that could bring a smile to his face by her mere presence. And of course, Greg took a lot of grief over it.

"She would bring me a cup of coffee if I spoke to her like that alright, just minus the cup portion," Greg chuckled. "Anything new?"

"No, just the latest intel data dump from England and the new weather forecast. Oh, yeah. And a continued demand for a status update. Since we have to go well away from here, I was waiting on Snoopy and his team to check in before sending a status report. Other than that, it's well below freezing out there right now which is not in the forecast. The team hasn't checked in and is due in at any time. I'm a little worried about them," said Thomas as Greg got out of the bed

and slipped on his boots. They walked the short distance to the command center and Greg filled his coffee cup.

“How cold is it out there?” asked Greg.

“About ten degrees Fahrenheit,” answered Thomas.

“A little cold,” remarked Greg as he took a sip of the hot liquid and felt a little guilty since the others might not have that same advantage.

“Yeah, I’m a little worried. When it gets that cold, people start making mistakes and don’t think straight. I know Snoopy and the rest are smart, but how much can they take?” asked Thomas.

“Trust them to do a good job. I mean, they have Solo out there with them and he is no stranger to that sort of thing. Remember North Carolina?” asked Greg.

“I’m trying to forget,” said Thomas. “Just keep a close eye out for them. If we don’t hear anything in another twelve hours, we will report them in as MIA and get the Germans to start looking for them. It’s their country and they would be better at figuring out where they might hole up,” said Thomas.

“Got it; go catch some shut eye,” said Greg.

But Thomas was worried and sleep wouldn’t come easily. His team members, but more importantly, his friends were out there in the cold and in the middle of hostile territory. He was worried about them since the temperatures were well below freezing and even bundled up the cold would eventually reach inside their warm layers and start to affect them on a physical and mental level. They would make mistakes, hypothermia could set in and the entire group could be put in danger by the seeping cold. Thomas eventually drifted off to sleep still wondering if he should send out a search party at first light.

“Everyone gotten a little warmer?” asked Darren as he finished up the last of the soup and put the stove out. The group looked a little better since the intake of the hot liquids and getting warm by the small stove. It didn’t take long to cool in the sub-freezing temperatures and was packed away for the continued journey. The remainder of the team got ready to move out and started putting packs under the branches to crawl out with. It would be far easier to drag them behind than try to wear them and get tangled in the branches as they learned on the way in.

Everyone was looking in better spirits now and had the drive to complete their journey to the bunker. While at the site, Alexander and Darren had redone their route and shaved a full kilometer off one of the doglegs. It meant walking down a steep slope, but it was better than

staying outside any longer than they had planned. The route was still secure, and possibly even more so since they were taking a route that was not easy to follow.

“Okay, we need to start battery conservation. Shut down all the handheld computers, two of the radios and two of the GPS’. Laser aimers need to be turned off. Night vision only for the lead and trail, but have the rest ready to go. If you start running low, grab the ones from your flashlights, laser aimers and your scopes last. And hope we don’t run into trouble which requires any of those objects,” said Darren before they started.

“Made more tracks in the snow,” said Frank, looking at the area with concern.

Alexander informed the group it wasn’t a big deal. “The IU rarely comes in this far and prefers to stick to the trails when they do. We must be careful to find a place where the snow has already melted to cross the next trail coming up.”

“Let’s get moving and get some distance behind us. I want to get to more cover before the dawn,” said Darren as he nodded forward with his head. The team moved forward, ever closer to their objective of the safety of the bunker.

“With our technological superiority, it has to be easier than last time,” said the Field Marshal in charge of the North American Union Expeditionary Forces in the United Kingdom and Ireland. He had just received the full briefing about the planned cross channel invasion of Europe. He had heard it before, but not the modifications built in recently. It was the start of the liberation drive for Europe and stopping point before crossing the Bosphorus Strait heading into Turkey and the Middle East.

The Lieutenant Colonel in charge of the brief sighed before going on. It was not uncommon for some to fight the last war, but this time, things were radically different. He was on the J-3 staff and responsible for Operations within the Continent. He also had knowledge of just about everything that was going on and often had to brief the Generals, Admirals and Marshals about the overall plan. This time was no different.

“It’s far worse than last time, Field Marshal. First off, some of the old defenses built by the Nazis on the beaches of Normandy are still there and have been upgraded and improved by the IU. And those that needed to be built were built rather quickly. Remember, they have had several years of preparation on us. Hitler started the Atlantic Wall in 1942 and it almost stopped our invasion forces on D-Day. However, the Nazis were fighting on two fronts then and the best troops weren’t immediately available.”

“This time? This time the IU has crack troops that have been practicing for an invasion for the better part of five years. Their defenses are very well sighted and heavily defended. Each beach is a death trap of minefields, machine guns nests, both light and heavy, and automatic grenade

launcher fire. They have mortars and artillery sighted in already to cover the beaches up to five miles out. Air support can and will get to the beach if they put up their forward fighter forces to engage ours. SAMs and Triple-A have the beaches covered as well. Everything from low altitude radar guided guns to high altitude SAMs. We are working on trying to whittle down the defenses, but it seems that each and every time we do, they move in something new to replace it.”

“They have three Army Groups in Northern France alone. The beaches where we are going to hit, Normandy, are covered by the 2nd Army Group which consists of the 301st, 177th, 178th and 191st Infantry Divisions, the 41st and 103rd Mechanized Infantry Divisions and the 3rd and 19th Armored Divisions. These are not exactly second line units. They have been fighting against the resistance since the invasion and have gotten very good at infantry combat. The Field Marshal in charge of the 2nd Army Group has been drilling his troops nonstop since we completed operations in England. And the 177th Infantry Division is made up of the remainder of the Corps that fought us to a standstill at Manchester, Birmingham and Southampton. The only reason they evacuated was because they were in danger of getting surrounded, not because of our victory like we put in the papers,” he concluded.

“So give me some good news,” ordered the Field Marshal.

“Good news? We will have the majority of our battlewagons back in action as well as the support cruisers. Interdiction aircraft are being put on standby as well as the majority of our close air support aircraft. Wild Weasel missions are being upped in the area along with strategic bombing of the known military bases. Fighter sweeps are being continually operated, but we are taking some losses in those. The IU has been putting more Typhoon squadrons forward instead of tying them to strategic targets. But we are holding our own for now,” said the Lieutenant Colonel.

“And the initial targets are still Le Havre, Cherbourg and Caen?” asked the Field Marshal.

“Exactly sir. We need the port facilities at Le Havre and Cherbourg and the crossroads at Caen. Which is why we are hitting Normandy in force. The ports will help us in the resupply efforts in both directions,” said the Lieutenant Colonel.

“And strategic plans? Have they changed?” asked the Field Marshal.

“No sir. The listing is still planned as follows:”

“Western Army Groups to include the Spanish and French 1st Brigade go south and west capturing Rennes, Brest, Saint-Nazaire and Nantes.”

“Central Army Groups to include the French 2nd Brigade, the German Airborne Brigade and the German Mechanized Infantry Brigade are set to go south capturing Paris, Orleans, and Reims.”

“Eastern Army Group to include the Polish Airborne Brigade, the Dutch Brigade and Belgian Cavalry Regiment swings east and northeast capturing Amiens, Lille and Calais.”

“Strategic reserves include the Italian Regiment, two divisions of the Pacifica 2nd Corps, a division of the AFNAS 1st Corps, the NESA 3rd Armored Division, your 2nd Light Infantry Brigade, the 3rd German Brigade, the Danish contingent and the Norwegian Brigade.”

“Your Corps is still assigned to the Central Army Group with the 2nd Infantry Division being part of the initial wave of landings. Your Airmobile Brigade is still planned as a reserve force for the airborne drops behind the Atlantic Wall and could be piecemealed into Battalion or Company sized reinforcements for the Regiments parachuting in before the landings start.”

“The ultimate goal is still a southeastern drive to link up with the Swiss and drive south to the Mediterranean Coast. Once there, we consolidate, reinforce and push towards Spain and Portugal in the west along with taking those parts of France that were passed by and pushing into Southern Germany and going north to the North Sea coast. Kind of like a reverse of what we did in World War Two. During this time, the Eastern Army Group will continue to fight a holding action with the IU forces in the Low Countries to keep them occupied and away from our lines of communication. After Germany we go after Eastern Europe and the Balkans and continue mopping up on the Iberian Peninsula and possibly strike across the Strait of Gibraltar. The same in the Western Army Group until it can be reinforced. But the forces allocated should be sufficient for extended operations all the way to the Pyrenees Mountains and possibly beyond. Either way, the Western Army Front is due to be reinforced for a drive into Spain and Portugal.”

“But everything hinges on the Central Army Group and its drive to Switzerland. If that drive stalls or is held up, we are looking at several months before we can mount an offensive again and will have to rethink our strategy. It is imperative we reach the Swiss and help them resupply. They are ready to jump in on our side but they want a secure supply line before doing so. Plus if the Russian Democratic Alliance wins the civil war, which could be within the next few months if the weather turns decent, they start attacks against the northern flank of the IU. Then we have ourselves a potentially new war,” concluded the Lieutenant Colonel.

“And our SOF teams?” asked the Field Marshal.

“Special operations teams have been pulling off some pretty good raids on the communications and logistics centers both in Normandy and in the surrounding areas to include the Low Countries. Resistance fighters in France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany have also been causing trouble with the logistics and communications lines with help from our Special Operations Forces. We currently have several operations underway,” said the Lieutenant Colonel.

“What about Operation Eris?” asked the Field Marshal, knowing one of his Battalions had a team far behind enemy lines causing trouble.

The Lieutenant Colonel got a little quiet since he really had nothing to brief on. But the Field Marshal would not go away without information. “Sir, we have lost contact with the team performing Operation Eris RedFive. They have not been in communication with us for the past three scheduled communications periods. The team leader did state he would not be able to

contact us as regularly as we might like, but either he has ignored our repeated demands for a status update or they have been compromised. We just don't know sir," said the Lieutenant Colonel.

"That's Major Tom Dayfield's team out there isn't it?" asked the Field Marshal who knew the answer already.

"Yes sir. He is in charge of the mission with Major Darren Thompson backing him up," said the Lieutenant Colonel.

"And we have reason to believe they have been compromised?" asked the Field Marshal.

"Sir, they have been out of contact for far too long. We have to assume the worst," said the Lieutenant Colonel.

"And the target?" asked the Field Marshal.

"Still operating as far as we can tell. Satellite imagery does not show a large smoking hole in the ground anywhere in their AO. The only thing unusual around there is the search for a downed bomber crew that went down somewhat close to them," said the Lieutenant Colonel.

"How did we know about that?" asked the Field Marshal.

"We got a report from one of the resistance cells nearby. They said they had been informed of the downed aircraft and were searching for the crew before the IU could get their hands on them," said the Lieutenant Colonel.

"And how did they know?" asked the Field Marshal.

"We do not know, sir," said the Lieutenant Colonel. "We are trying to find that out, but it takes time to get messages back and forth with the resistance."

"Any reason to believe Dayfield's team passed on the message to the resistance?" asked the Field Marshal.

"It's a possibility," said the Lieutenant Colonel who had shot down that idea from a junior Captain when he brought it up in their staff meeting. He thought the idea had merit, but wasn't sure since the team was not in contact.

"Dayfield and that rowdy crew of his are survivors. Chances are they are lying low and waiting for their chance to strike. I mean, he did pass along that message about not being able to keep a regular comms schedule? Maybe the resistance he is with won't let him transmit because it gives away their location," suggested the Field Marshal.

"Could be sir. We will keep that in mind," said the Lieutenant Colonel.

“Just the same, put another strike force on alert and get them prepped. Make it double what they went in with the first time. Either to go in and rescue Dayfield and his group or to take the target out. Also, generate some close air support at the ready five or on airborne alert in case they need it. And I get this feeling with them being that deep into Germany they might need it. Make it a flight of four fighters outfitted for close air support and limited air-to-air,” ordered the Field Marshal.

“For one team sir?” asked the Lieutenant Colonel and immediately regretted it.

“Yes, for one team! We don’t leave people behind and do everything in our power to even collect the remains so they can be buried properly and not put on display in Tehran! You should remember one thing Colonel; you leave those teams out to hang and I can flat guarantee you had better have your will filled out. Because those who come back will not be stopped and if nobody comes back, the other members of that Colorado Ranch will track you down and fill an unmarked grave with your body. They are not only a team, they are like family!” growled the Field Marshal.

“I understand sir,” said the Lieutenant Colonel meekly.

“I want a plan from your office and on my Chief of Staff’s desk by 0800 tomorrow. Timelines, service and support and complete operations concept briefing. And it had better be good or I will put your butt on that lead aircraft on the search and rescue party,” growled the Field Marshal.

“It will be done sir,” said the Lieutenant Colonel.

“Good briefing otherwise Colonel. Let me know if things change,” said the Field Marshal as he picked up his hat and departed the secure room.

After the door closed, the Lieutenant Colonel immediately got on the phone. “I need the senior most special operations planner you have along with the air attaché, the logistics coordinator and the planning staff in the secure conference room in fifteen minutes. We might be planning a rescue mission. Also get the 14th Special Operations Battalion of the N-A-U on the horn and give them a warning order to prepare for a possible mission in Germany.”

The Lieutenant Colonel looked down at his notepad and knew time was of the essence to create a plan.

“14th Special Operations Battalion TOC. This is a secure line. Sergeant Meredith speaking, how may I help you?” asked Technical Sergeant Holly Meredith.

“This is Major Clinton from the JSOC. This is an official notification of an incoming WARNORD for possible deployment. Incoming packet should be arriving via secure net in the

next two minutes. Plan Code is Eris Lost. Operation name is Eris Lost. Code Challenge is Victor-Lima-Two-Foxtrot-Nine. Confirm,” said the voice on the other end of the phone.

“Roger, WARNORD for incoming packet for possible deployment. Plan Code is Eris Lost. Operation name is Eris Lost. Code challenge confirmation is Victor-Lima-Two-Foxtrot-Nine. Is my read back correct?” asked Holly.

“Roger, read back is correct. Please send confirmation via secure net upon receipt of packet,” said the Major on the other end of the phone before hanging up.

Holly turned to go to the secure terminal and download the new warning order, or WARNORD. It happened quite often for new missions and she really didn’t give it much thought. That was until she opened the packet and found out what the mission was about. Scanning over the Situation and Mission paragraphs, she immediately knew there was something wrong. She got on the phone and called the exterior orderly room.

“I need a runner like yesterday,” she ordered into the phone before hanging up and sending the required confirmation on the packet. Seeing it was sending, she went back to the door just as the Private banged on it. He was on the sick, lame and lazy list, a victim of the last bombing attack. He had been injured in the arm and couldn’t perform maintenance until it properly healed. But he could be of service in other ways.

“I want you to go track down Lieutenant Dave Lawson, Captain Shannon Parsons, Senior Master Sergeant Tim Daniels and Major Mark Williams like yesterday. Tell them to get over here ASAP. Let them know the word ‘inferno.’ Got it?” she asked.

“Where would they be?” asked the Private.

“I haven’t the first clue. Get with the S-3 shop and figure that out. Grab a friend and send them off to find them. Remember, tell them ‘inferno.’ Do you understand that?” she asked.

“Yes ma’am, find them, tell them ‘inferno’ and tell them to get over here on the double,” repeated the Private, wondering how an NCO got away with ordering Officers and Senior NCOs around. On his way out he grabbed his buddy who was lounging back and looking at a magazine. They headed towards the Operations shop for the Battalion and made contact with the NCOIC there.

Inferno was a code word they had developed that let others know there was a team in danger. It went all the way back to the days on the Ranch when a patrol might have been in a compromising position. It had carried over to their time in the military and had even been adopted by other units. It was homage to Dante’s Inferno and simply meant the others would travel to the depths of hell to retrieve their comrades.

Holly was quickly printing out everything in the office to include the most up to date intelligence and satellite imagery. Within fifteen minutes, the four she had summoned had showed up, but

also brought along Staff Sergeant Stu Donaldson, Staff Sergeant Amy Kerns and Specialist-4 Johnny Thompson.

“I only asked for the four team leaders,” said Holly when they all entered.

“You sent out an ‘inferno’ call. And you had better believe if my Dad is in trouble I’m coming along,” said Johnny.

“And the same goes for me. I’ve got someone I care about out there,” said Amy.

“And my friends are out there. Just try and get me to leave,” said Stu.

“Okay, never mind. Here’s the situation. We got a warning order for possible deployment as either a rescue team or search and recovery for Thomas and Darren’s teams. They have been out of contact for over three days now and the brass is getting jumpy. Also, we might have to go in and destroy the target they were assigned. Operation Plan codename is Eris Lost. Here’s the WARNORD,” she said as she handed over the four copies she printed out.

“Trouble with them?” asked Mark.

“Don’t know yet. But we are to prepare for the eventuality of going in and finding out,” said Holly. “And I want in as well.”

“You are injured. You have a bum knee,” said Tim.

“You better bet your behind I’m in. My knee is fine and this is my chance to repay an old debt. Those two saved my life one time and I have yet to repay that debt. Mike Dugger was in on that as well and I owe it to their family to get their daughter back. Even if I have to sneak onto that plane, I’m going,” she said adamantly.

“Okay, you’re in on my team. I’ll bump Jerry Sheppard down to alternate,” said Shannon Parsons. “Let’s get to planning folks.”

And the planning began in earnest and continued throughout that day.

Date/Time: 16 March/1541

Location: German Resistance Bunker, Near Speicher, Occupied Germany

“It’s been twelve hours now since you said you were going to head out looking for them,” said Greg.

“Yeah, get the team together while I track down Erik. We are going to need his folks to help out,” said Thomas as he left the room.

As Greg briefed in his team, the other two wanted to go along as well. He had a hard time trying to put them off until Thomas showed back up. Rick was the most vocal member of the “opposition.”

“You need to let my team go out. I’m the junior team but I have the best trackers. Plus you need to stick around here and organize the rescue if that comes down to it. I’m the best choice to go,” said Rick without any prompting.

“Better to let me go,” said Michael Parsons. “With Snoopy gone, I’ve got the second in charge. It should be my mission to go find them.”

“Well, either one of us, but you need to stay behind Warbucks,” said Rick.

“Seriously, I know they are your friends, but they are my friends too and you are too valuable to be going out looking for them. We can’t have our top two guys gone like that,” said Parsons.

“And you know the mission specifics and could coordinate the strike with the resistance if we don’t make it back,” said Rick.

“Plus you would be better to make contact with follow on forces if they happen to come in,” said Parsons.

“Okay guys, give me a chance to reply would you,” snapped Thomas. “Badaa, get your team ready to go. Erik has promised us four bodies to start and another sixteen when he can get the word out. He is sending runners out when you guys leave.”

“We have a projected course?” asked Rick.

“No, but Erik seems to think they would have gone north around Speicher. He said that is a common route for the resistance to go through these woods here,” said Thomas as he pointed at the map. “When they are in trouble. And apparently there has been some trouble he just learned. There have been IU sweeps in the nearby towns due to a convoy getting hit somewhat near where they were.”

“Okay, and from there?” asked Rick.

“Best guess?” asked Erik as he walked into the room. “They would go north and then west, following the river towards here. Much like the path we were on the other day.”

“So backtrack along that line?” asked Rick.

“Yes, that is your best option. But they may not be found easily,” said Erik.

“Why?” asked Parsons.

“It is fairly thick here and you could walk right past someone and not notice. We do it all the time with the IU,” said Erik.

“We have to try anyway,” said Rick. “Who’s going with us?”

“I have a team of four getting ready to go with you. I have sent a runner to let others know and it may take a couple of hours to get them assembled. It is not an easy task after daybreak,” said Erik.

“Get your stuff ready. Let me see your handheld,” said Thomas to Rick. He passed it over and Thomas typed out a quick message. “Once you get in the clear, send this message out to England. If you find them, send this one instead,” he said pointing at the two messages.

“Got it. Anything else?” asked Rick as he pulled on his web gear.

“If you find any bodies, bring them back,” said Thomas.

“I’ll bring them back alive instead. I would hate to think of having to carry Irish that far,” grinned Rick and trying to make the best of the situation.

“Godspeed,” said Thomas as he shook Rick’s hand and in turn, his entire team. Erik had assembled his team and met them at the door leading out. Thomas took the time to shake their hands as well giving them a “Danke” in the process. It was almost like a funeral procession was leaving instead of a search party.

“Now what?” asked Michael.

“Now we wait,” said Thomas.

Rick and the team had moved away from the bunker almost a kilometer when the lead called for a halt. Heather Davis brought her hand up palm out at first and then clinched her fist, meaning “take cover!”

The rest of the team moved as quickly as they could while not making any noise. Heather had seen something ahead of them in the woods, but could not make out the shape of it. She continued to watch and had her rifle at the ready, prepared to fire at the first sign of trouble. They had already planned out something like this during training and she knew she was to take the first shots while the rest of the team set up an ambush behind her. She would then go back and join them on the leg of the ambush.

Something was still moving ahead, very slowly until it suddenly stopped as well. Again, she could not make out what it was and was prepared to move slightly to get a better vantage point. Suddenly her earpiece came to life.

“This is Snoopy calling force to the west-north-west of Speicher. Come up with call sign,” said Darren’s voice in her earpiece.

“Snoopy, this is Trouble. About time you came home. Advance and be recognized,” said Heather with a grin. Darren and his team had made it back to safety.

Date/Time: 16 March/1928 Local

Location: RAF Bassingbourn, Cambridgeshire County, Great Britain

It was a hasty mission but had been planned out to the smallest detail. The sixteen members of the 14th Special Operations Battalion along with another fourteen members of an AFNAS SEAL Team were readying parachutes and getting ready to board the C-130 on the flightline. It was in fact the same C-130 that had carried Thomas and his team into Germany before. Mark Williams had prepared the two teams and although they had dissimilar tactics, they knew enough of each other’s jobs to quickly overcome any differences. Mark was also the senior officer and thus the commander of the rescue mission and had to brief the other team quickly before taking off. They had only arrived on Bassingbourn a little over three hours ago and needed to be brought up to speed rather quickly.

They were amazed at the quickness of everything that had been done so far. It seemed like they only had to mention their operation name and things just magically appeared. They didn’t abuse the system at all, but were surprised when they asked for a C-130 and one appeared less than an hour later. But now they needed to focus on the job and getting it done.

Equipment was checked and the final data dump was loaded into their handheld computers. Buddies checked buddies and they slowly climbed up the ramp of the aircraft to prepare to depart. The loadmaster gave his typical safety briefing although these men and women had enough flight time under their belts that he didn’t need to bother. But it was protocol and he went through the briefing anyway.

Outside the engines were starting up, the right outboard one first and the other three quickly coming along as power was generated from the spinning props. The troops buckled themselves in for what would be another wild ride down on the deck as they traveled into Germany.

The aircraft lurched forward as the brakes were released and the aircraft began taxiing towards the runway. But halfway down the taxiway, the aircraft came to a stop and the plane turned

around on itself before heading back to the ramp. The loadmaster was seen talking into his headset to the pilot and turned to Williams.

“We’re heading back to the ramp. Apparently we have been put on hold,” he yelled over the engines.

“What’s going on?” asked Mark.

“Don’t know. The tower called and told us to head back to the ramp and standby,” said the loadmaster.

Mark returned to his seat amidst the stares of his team members and the SEALs. He would brief them once they were stopped and knew more information. As they pulled towards the parking area, he saw a member of the Intelligence Unit on the base standing near where they would be parked. Once they got stopped, the engines started shutting down, adding to the confusion of the members on board. The back door was opened after the Specialist banged on it from the outside.

“Your mission has been scrubbed Major. You are to stand down,” said the Specialist.

“What? Why?” demanded Mark.

The Specialist handed over a single piece of paper from his uniform pocket. Mark took it and unfolded it. It was not exactly the way to carry around classified information, but he would let this minor transgression go for now. He quickly read the message, but the last part was the one that mattered the most.

MESSAGE FROM TEAM ERIS 1403161947Z BREAK ERIS ALPHA AND PARTY RETURNED FROM RECON OF OBJECTIVE ERIS BREAK VALID TARGET LOCATION AT REFERENCE GOLF ON MISSION PLANNING MAPS BREAK OPERATION ERIS WILL PROCEED NLT 0001 20 MAR FOR STRIKE AT TARGET BREAK WILL CONFIRM STATUS OF TARGET UPON COMPLETION BREAK ADDITIONAL SUPPORT REQUESTED BREAK WILL SEND REQUIREMENTS IN MESSAGE W/I NEXT 24-36 HOURS BREAK WILL NOT WAIT FOR CONFIRMATION BREAK WILL CONTINUE LIMITED COMMUNICATIONS UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE BREAK REQUEST CONTINUED INTELLIGENCE AND WEATHER DATA BE SENT TO ERIS MAILBOX BREAK ALL MEMBERS OF TEAM ERIS ACCOUNTED FOR AT TIME OF THIS MESSAGE BREAK MESSAGE ENDS

CHAPTER 13 - ADVANCES

Date/Time: 16 March/2253

Location: German Resistance Bunker, Near Speicher, Occupied Germany

After their return, Darren and his team sat down and completed their after action report and their findings on the recon mission. They included everything from start to finish including the run in with the site security, the ambush of the truck, and the problems they faced in Zemmer. No detail was left out as even the smallest tidbit of intelligence could be analyzed and exploited. Finishing up, Thomas saw the team was dead on their feet and dismissed them to get some sleep as they could do so now somewhat comfortably in a secure environment.

“Still a few unanswered questions boss,” said Michael. They were still waiting on Rick and Scott to return from sending the message before any serious planning attempts would be made.

“Yeah, but I think they can wait until these guys get some rest. Hypothermia was probably close to setting in and they all are probably suffering from exposure. Let them get some sleep and eat. It can wait,” said Thomas.

“I didn’t mean to wake them up, I just meant with all that happened to them, it might mean we need to bump up the timeline a little. The ambush and the soldiers they killed are bound to raise a few eyebrows. Either that or we work on a diversion to get their attention away from the objective. I’m wondering what our resistance friends can do for us?” asked Michael.

“You thinking a diversionary attack by the resistance to get the IU looking the other way?” asked Thomas.

“It’s a thought,” said Michael. “But how? They would know the best tactics to use out here and the best targets.”

“Let’s find Erik and ask,” said Thomas as they left the small closet they had been using to go over the mission notes.

They wandered into the command center and found Erik napping in one of the chairs. He had gone home earlier to let his wife know he wouldn’t be back for a while and to check on his daughter who was suffering from the flu. Before he had left, Nate Clark had dug into his medical kit and gave over some antibiotics. Nate was one of the medics assigned to the team and had a ready supply of most drugs. He knew the antibiotic might harm her if she had a reaction, but she also could use the boost to her immune system while it beat off the influenza inhabiting her body. They could make a special house call if anything serious happened.

Shaking Erik gently, he woke with one eye open to see who was bothering him. Stretching out his arms over his head, he sat up and drawled out “what’s up?” in far more of a German accent they had heard to this point.

“We had a few questions, but we can wait until later if we need to,” said Michael.

“No, it is okay. Let me get woken up here,” said Erik.

“How is your daughter?” asked Thomas.

“My wife gave her some of the pills to help so we should know something in a day or so. But this is not uncommon for children during the winter. They catch the flu and it takes its toll. Some children die from the lack of medical care so I should be thanking you. My wife sends her regards,” said Erik.

“Tell her we appreciate her understanding in taking you away for so long,” said Michael.

“It is nothing. She understands I do what I do for the sake of Germany and the sake of freedom. What can I help my American friends with?” asked Erik.

“We were looking over the notes from the mission and wondered if it might be possible to have some sort of distraction, a diversionary attack to draw the attention away from the communications bunker,” said Michael.

Taking a sip of the coffee that was never in short supply now, Erik thought about the proposal. “We already thought you might want something like this, so we already have informed our counterparts in other areas to prepare for this. What did you have in mind?” asked Erik.

“Well, honestly, this is kind of your call. You know the IU here better than we do so whatever you come up with we can’t argue with unless it puts our teams at risk,” said Thomas.

Erik shifted in his seat and spat out some rapid fire German at the individuals behind him. They immediately came to the center table and started pointing at the map and gibbering on in German. Some heads were shaken while others were nodded. A couple of louder voices called at each other and broke into minor arguments. Other voices were quieter and spoken with more authority. Neither Thomas nor Michael spoke enough German to understand, but it appeared the Germans were not arguing on if it could be done, but how. It appeared all too familiar as it looked more like their own planning sessions than anything else. There was probably more to it, especially if they got the other cells involved. They were joined by Amber who helped translate as best as she could.

“They are talking about wide scale attacks across the region...not just here, but with other groups as well...the air bases, outposts and garrisons around the region...now they are arguing about contacting the other groups...I’m having a really hard time keeping up,” admitted Amber who went over to a water container to fill her bottle. Eventually an accord was reached by the Germans and Erik came over to brief them on what had been decided.

“We have been waiting on something like this for a while. A really good reason to go after some of the garrisons and after the air bases themselves. Your presence here just gives us an excuse to

start planning large operations and contacting other groups to help out. We plan on sending out runners to contact other leaders and discuss what we are planning,” said Erik.

“Isn’t that dangerous?” asked Michael.

“I will not mention your presence here if that is what you are asking. We gave our word you would not be mentioned and we plan on keeping that. It may take a couple of days to get everything organized, but the other cells have been planning their own attacks for a while now. Maybe we could coordinate them over the entire region,” said Erik.

“And the communications site?” asked Thomas.

“No, that is in our area of responsibility and the others would not attack it without letting us know first,” said Erik.

“Sounds good. We are waiting on our others to return before making any plans of our own,” said Michael.

“Also, how long will it take to set all this up?” asked Thomas.

“Maybe not so long. Most groups plan attacks at any given point in time and many have big plans. I think we can communicate and let them know they need to implement the biggest plans they can perform,” said Erik.

“How long is maybe not so long? They might have been alerted to the presence of the recon team and beef up security,” asked Thomas.

“Maybe a day to alert them and another day to implement their plans. They do not have to go off at the same time, but close enough to confuse the IU,” said Erik.

“That’s not long at all,” said Michael.

“We do not have large scale operations like you do. It is easier for us to get them done in a short time,” said Erik.

“Okay, we’ll make our final plans for the mission and let you know what we need,” said Thomas.

“I understand. I will probably be going home in a few minutes to check on my family and take a shower. Will you be ready by tomorrow?” asked Erik.

“Yes, we should have most of what we need by then,” said Michael.

“That shower sounds really nice,” said Amber who was tiring of the spit and washcloth baths they had been taking.

“I think something could be arranged if you desired,” said Erik.

“I wonder if what happened to them while they were out would happen to us,” said Michael.

“We have some fairly secluded houses nearby that could be used if you needed it,” said Erik.

“Let us think about that before we commit,” said Thomas, who liked the idea as well, but also knew the dangers in doing so. It would help them in the long run by cleaning off their skin and keeping them from being so cold. It would also give them the opportunity to wash out some clothing as well. But for a morale boost they all needed if nothing else. He would bring it up to the group and let them decide. But for now, they would look at the map and try to determine what they needed for the attack based on the intelligence gathered by Darren and his team.

Thomas wanted Darren and his team in on the planning, but knew he didn’t need to wake him just yet. Plus the two Germans that had gone with them would be valuable as well. Since it was “local” for them, they might have noticed things out of place Darren and the others might have missed. But overall, planning started on the basis of what they had brought out. It was a pretty straightforward plan and one they had rehearsed in England. The main problem would be getting past the doors going into the bunker, but a careful application of high explosives should make that problem go away. There were other possibilities such as the changing of the guard shift, but that depended greatly on timing. But once inside, that’s when the party would start.

Thomas hated room clearing and clearing built up areas. Hated it with a passion. While his team was good at it, there was always that off chance of someone popping up from that little corridor nobody knew about. And after popping up, they could and would take shots at the team. Adding in the fact they had no idea what the inside of the structure looked like or the general layout meant even more problems to be overcome. More personnel would have to begin the assault and that meant even more potential casualties. Well over half the team had been wounded to some extent or other during urban operations and Thomas guessed at least two or three of them would be hit this time around as well, no matter how well they planned. But he looked over the recon notes and the other intelligence they had on the target and started coming up with a plan in his own mind. Of course they would discuss it as a group, but he wanted to be prepared along the way.

“It’s quiet out here,” said the pilot of the bomber as they looked across the open field.

“Yeah, a little spooky,” said the DSO.

“You think someone else is around?” asked the pilot.

“Maybe,” said the DSO, who had spent a lot of times in the woods from an early age.

“Can we do it?” asked the OSO.

“We need water and there isn’t any nearby,” said the copilot. “But there is a small valley up ahead and I would be willing to bet AFNAS pennies to Texan Dollars there is a creek down there.”

“Let’s chance it,” suggested the pilot and put the decision on the rest of them.

“I’m in,” said the OSO.

“Might as well,” said the copilot.

“Okay, follow me then,” said the DSO as the entire group stood up and started walking single file towards the clearing. They had been resting on a small knoll overlooking the larger field and had about another two hundred meters of woods to cross before they were in the clearing. The DSO could hear the other three stumbling slightly in the undergrowth, but figured the sound was not enough to travel far. But the sounds were carried in the still night air further than they thought. They had gone a hundred meters before a figure appeared to their front from behind a large tree.

“*Hände hoch*,” ordered the voice and pointed a rifle at them. The phrase was repeated in Arabic as well. The person was joined by several others to the aircrew’s side and front.

The DSO knew it was better not to resist at this point as it would mean certain death. The German phrase was also heard, but it could have been an IU patrol speaking German. “We’ve been caught guys. Put down your weapons and your hands up.”

The aircrew thought about it for a moment and decided against resistance. They collectively put down their weapons and placed their hands on top of their head.

“*Wer sind sie?*” asked a second member of the German resistance cell operating out of Daun to the leader.

“*Ich habe keine Ahnung, wer diese Leute sind*,” said the first as he looked at the four they had just captured. The resistance thought it might have been a small IU patrol at first, but on second thought, they might not be as they appeared. Only one of the group spoke any English.

“You are who?” he stuttered at the four.

“We are Americans...Ick been Americaners,” drawled the DSO who was from Mississippi originally and completely murdered the German phrase.

“You are American?” asked the German man.

“Yes, we are American. Do you speak English?” asked the DSO.

“A little,” said the man. “You is who? Why you is here?”

“We’re an aircrew from a bomber that was shot down nearby. We’ve been walking towards a place we could be rescued. Are you German resistance? Can you get us to safety?” asked the DSO rapid fire. The words were too quick for the Germans.

“Ich verstehe kein Wort von dem, was Sie sagen. Sie müssen langsamer sprechen,” said the German in the lead, who knew for a fact he had a bunch of Americans on his hands. *Tell them you speak a little English and they think you are a University Professor in the language and speak even faster,* thought the leader.

“We are pilots. We were shot down. Are you resistance?” asked the DSO slower and a little louder.

“Wir sind die Dauner Freiheitskämpfer,” said the lead German, barely understanding the resistance question. He guessed the small group were pilots due to the flight suits they all wore.

“I don’t understand,” said the DSO, still slowly and loudly.

Why is it all Americans feel the need to talk louder and slower thinking we will understand better? thought the German to himself. “We is German...ahhh...fighters of free...from Daun.”

“It’s the resistance!” said the DSO a little louder than planned.

“Ihr müsst still sein! Es sind feindliche Patrouillen in der Nähe!” said the German very sternly. The German words must have sounded far harsher than he realized and he didn’t want to come off as mean. But the group quieted down immediately. “Ahhh...enemy people near, must talk not. We go to safe.”

“I think he is saying we need to stop talking, they are going to take us to safety and there are enemy troops nearby,” said the DSO.

“Ya think?” asked the pilot with a chuckle, glad these were not IU troops.

“Ihr seid bei uns sicher. Wir beschützen euch,” said the lead German. He saw his German words were lost on the four. *“Kommen, kommen”* he bid by waving his hand.

“What now?” asked the DSO.

“We go with them. They’re our best chance of communicating with England and arranging a rescue,” said the pilot.

The aircrew immediately retrieved their weapons on the ground only to find the Germans come over to take them away. They also attempted to take the pistols from holsters at their hips and under their shoulders. The aircrew made an attempt to keep their weapons from being taken. The small band of Germans immediately drew back and resumed pointing their rifles at the

aircrew. The aircrew immediately pulled their pistols and pointed right back. The situation could get out of hand really quickly.

“Sie sind bei uns sicher, wir Schützen sie,” said the leader in German very calmly. Seeing once again his German words were lost on the four. He raised his hands at the group palms out and walked slowly towards them. “You safe...we...safe you.”

“Give up your weapons guys,” said the pilot, seeing the Germans were just being cautious. The four reluctantly gave up their pistols and the two groups relaxed a little.

“Do I get a receipt with that?” asked the OSO with a chuckle after handing over the custom Kimber 1911.

“Vas?” asked the German resistance with a shake of his head.

“Never mind,” said the OSO with a smile. And just like the last war, a smile would help ease tensions far more than words.

“Es ist ein langer Marsch und wir müssen vor Tagesanbruch los,” said the leader, waving his arm. Four Germans took the lead and four behind the aircrew as they set off on the long walk to make it to where they were going before daybreak.

Date/Time: 17 March/0915

Location: German Resistance Bunker, Near Speicher, Occupied Germany

“What do you think?” asked Thomas to Michael as he presented his plan of action. Thomas had been up most of the night formulating the plan.

“For the moment, it looks good, but a lot will depend on what Darren and his team came up with,” said Michael, looking over the handwritten notes.

“I’m kind of worried about the civilian side of it,” said Thomas.

“I know, but from the intel briefs in England, this place doesn’t have any. But think about it, there is no reason whatsoever for us to believe there are non-combatants inside. And knowing this makes our job a lot easier,”

“True. But even we have workers inside our secret military installations,” said Thomas.

“When was the last time you saw the IU have enough trust to let the locals inside anything before?” asked Michael.

“Okay, you got me,” said Thomas as Erik came back to them.

“I have some initial plans from other groups,” announced Erik.

“That quickly?” asked Michael.

“We might not have the most technical communications in the world, but it works for our purposes,” said Erik. “Word of mouth often travels quicker than radio.”

“Hopefully more secure,” said Thomas.

“Only by people we trust,” said Erik.

“So what do you have so far?” asked Michael.

“Contact with the other major groups in the region. Most of them have gotten back to us fairly quickly and like the idea of hitting the IU at the same time. But we have some coordination on the times to do and this depends greatly on what time you start your attacks,” said Erik.

“We haven’t decided yet. I was about to wake up Snoopy and get his input on this,” said Thomas.

“Don’t bother,” said Darren walking into the room looking worlds better. The forced twelve straight hours of sleep had been good for him. The remainder of his team was still asleep, however, the Germans had gone home to rest up there instead of in the shelter.

“Feeling better dear?” asked Michael with a smile.

“Only if I was in my own bed in Colorado,” said Darren, a minor slip of security.

“The life we chose,” said Thomas. “We have some initial plans and want you to look over them.”

“Whatcha got?” said Darren as he washed out his canteen cup and poured a cup of the seemingly endless supply of coffee. However, he was taken aback by the taste. “What is this?” he asked with a sour look on his face.

“That is the coffee brought in by the Muslims. A little rich?” asked Erik.

“It’s got a kick to it,” said Darren as he took another sip. Arabian coffee certainly was stouter than what they were used to. Thomas handed over the notes and gave a quick rundown of what he had come up with concerning the attack. Darren looked over the plans and noticed more than a few intelligence tidbits from his recon had been added. “I notice your concern for civilian casualties.”

“We have to be careful,” said Thomas.

“There are no civilians at the target that we know of. It is only military personnel,” said Erik.

“One hundred percent positive?” asked Thomas.

“As positive as we can be. We know of no reason there would be. Even the cleaning is done by the military there,” said Erik.

“This makes the job simpler,” said Michael.

Darren continued to review and saw a team was dedicated to the exterior security. “We sure about this?” he asked.

“Have to be. We need some exterior security. It won’t do for us to get inside and get bottled up by a response force from Spang or Trier,” said Thomas.

“We don’t know the full extent of the interior design. We might need all sixteen on the interior,” said Darren.

“And who does the exterior while we are inside?” asked Michael.

A polite “ahem” was heard from behind them. Apparently Erik was volunteering to help out and be more than just a guide and a source of local intelligence. “My people can help.”

“You sure about that? It could get dangerous,” said Michael.

“More dangerous than living under the boot of the Islamic Union every day?” asked Erik.

“The man’s got a point,” said Thomas.

“I know we cannot help you on the interior as we are not familiar with your tactics, but we can provide security on the outside while you do your job inside,” said Erik.

“How many can you get?” asked Michael.

“How many do you need?” asked Erik.

“Depends on how long we will be there, reaction times by the response forces and the ex-fil plan,” said Thomas.

“I believe eight should be enough. I can pick my best people for this and assign the others to strike at the air base,” said Erik.

“And what of your other attacks?” asked Thomas.

“I will know shortly. I have one more runner returning before I will know for certain,” said Erik.

“Hey guys, planning a party without me?” asked Rick as he came into the command center. He had the night shift watch and had gone to sleep earlier. Since Thomas was deep in his planning, he didn’t think to wake him until later and after they had some other holes filled in their intelligence gaps.

“No, we knew you needed your beauty rest, but we also know we don’t have enough time for that,” laughed Thomas.

The reply was one that might have started a fight had they not been such good friends, but they were used to ribbing at each other and knew it wasn’t serious. “What else have we come up with?” asked Rick.

Darren handed over the notes and Rick quickly scanned over them. He also saw the holes in the plan that only Darren and his team could fill in. But overall, he liked the plan and only had a few modifications to it that could improve the overall plan. But he would wait until the team meeting to discuss them.

“I also have some good news. There are two homes willing to provide you shower facilities if you would like them,” said Erik. “They are nearby so the walk there should be easy.”

“That sounds great, but we know some need it more than others,” said Rick as he peered at Thomas in an attempt to make up for the prod from earlier.

“Yeah, we could all use it. I mean, the smell of Badaa alone would give away our position quicker than anything else,” said Darren, picking sides in the poking match.

“You are one to talk. I thought it was one of those wild boars coming in here when you got back,” laughed Rick.

“Okay, when and where? And batting order?” asked Michael as he brought the subject back on track.

“Whenever you want to go. Where, we can show you and provide guides to the homes,” said Erik.

“Batting order will be Snoopy’s and Token’s team, followed by Badaa and mine. You want to let everyone know?” asked Thomas to Michael.

“Oh, gladly,” laughed Michael as he walked away.

“Where are the houses at?” asked Thomas.

“One is here in Speicher,” said Erik as he pointed at the map. “And the other is here in Röhl. The one there will take longer to get to since we must cross the river.”

“Making the trip in the daytime?” asked Thomas.

“I can send out scouts in advance and clear the path,” said Erik.

“While under normal conditions, I might say we need to hold off. But at the same time, we could use a bath for morale if nothing else,” said Darren.

“Please let me know when you are ready,” said Erik as Alexander walked back into the room. He talked for a few moments with Erik in German before turning to the rest of the Americans when Michael returned.

“I think you just gave an early Christmas to the guys. I’ve never seen them so happy,” said Michael.

“We have our target listing for you if you would like to know,” said Erik.

“The diversion attacks?” asked Rick.

“Yes. Here are the targets we know will be hit while we go after the communications bunker: the airfields at Spangdahlem and Bitburg along with the small airfield at Föhren, the garrisons at Daun, Wittlich, Trier, Prüm, Badem and Landscheid, the supply base at Gerolstein and the traffic control station at the A1 and A60 Autobahn interchange. Some will be small and others larger, like the air bases,” said Erik.

“Why so many targets?” asked Thomas.

“Because it is standard practice to have the troops fall back on the major installations during an attack. And most of the outposts will send their troops towards the *Flugplatze* during attacks to safeguard them and hopefully capture us. Once they start moving away from their garrisons and into the open, we can strike at them easier. We have been waiting for the opportunity and excuse to make large attacks against the IU here,” said Alexander.

“And the other groups know of our attack at the bunker?” asked Darren.

“No, they think we are planning only the attack against the air base. The only people that know of your attack against the bunker are myself, Alexander, Christian and my second in command Hans. We have kept it a secret from our own people in case one of them is captured,” said Erik.

“Very sensible of you,” said Rick.

“We have stayed alive long enough to know about keeping secrets,” said Erik. “Did you want to bathe today?”

“Yes, the teams are preparing to go now,” said Michael.

“I will send teams out to sweep. Give us an hour or so and we can let you know,” said Erik as he turned and spat out orders to the other Germans. Four personnel grabbed weapons and departed the location.

The four Americans went back to their teams and sat back down to discuss the affairs. The full on planning stage would take part after the group had the opportunity to shower and shave.

“Are you wondering if the Germans will work out okay on the exterior?” asked Darren.

“Yeah, it’s a concern of mine,” said Thomas.

“They are good to go I think. We just need to make sure Erik understand the importance of this place,” said Darren.

“I don’t think they know for a fact the bunker controls communications into France and the Low Countries. If they knew the strategic importance of the bunker, maybe it will help,” said Rick.

“Yeah, we need to let him know just why it is important. I mean, they all know the invasion is coming soon, but this is a major part of the invasion planning. We start lopping off the heads of the communications nexus around Europe and they should know the invasion is going to start soon after,” said Darren.

“And we expect the invasion to start within a week or two of our mission complete here,” said Thomas. “Yeah, we can let them know how important it is. But only after we get everything planned out and put them in as the exterior force.”

They sat around and discussed other things while they waited for the all clear from Erik’s patrols. The two teams got their gear ready to go, packing enough for a two day stay as usual in case they ran into trouble. Before they all knew it, everyone was pretty excited about being able to get cleaned up and possibly the chance to wash some clothing. They were unsure of the way the Germans were able to do laundry, but it never hurt to ask. Erik came back into the room before long.

“The patrols have cleared the way into Röhl but are waiting for a signal from Speicher. Apparently there is an IU patrol sitting in the middle of town,” he said as he entered the room.

“Any chance of them heading towards Röhl?” asked Michael.

“A possibility, but more likely they are heading back to the air base. They are eating at a local restaurant,” said Erik.

“Okay, Snoopy, get your team ready to go. There is plenty of cover between here and there. Token, your team goes when the all clear comes through,” said Thomas.

“You don’t have to tell us twice,” said Darren as he put on his web gear and shouldered up his pack. The rest of his team quickly followed suit. Two Germans were going along as ground

guides for the team as they went towards the front door. As soon as they reached it, the phone rang quietly in the main room. One of the other Germans on duty picked it up and called out to Erik in German. They had a brief conversation before Erik turned to the Americans.

“The patrol has left town and is heading towards the air base. Your other team can move out now,” he said with a smile.

“Token, that’s your cue,” said Thomas as the team was already in the process of gearing up for the short journey to the town.

The two team leaders gave Thomas and Rick a quick GOTWA plan in case they ran into trouble. The two teams were lined up next to the door with two more Germans added in the mix for the other team. The exterior was checked and the “*alle ist klar*” was said and didn’t need to be translated. The two teams quickly left the bunker under the watchful eyes and anticipation of the other two teams, hoping they would return soon and get some relief themselves.

CHAPTER 14 – MORALE

Date/Time: 17 March/1922

Location: German Resistance Bunker, Near Speicher, Occupied Germany

Darren and Michael returned a little later than planned, but had radioed in advance of their return to let the others know they were going to be running a little late. However, both teams got there close to each other and worked their way over to the waiting Rick and Thomas looking worlds better.

“It’s quite heavenly,” laughed Jeremy with his customary grin from ear to ear.

“And don’t be surprised if they try to feed you,” added Willy Perez as he set down his H&K machine gun and dropped his patrol pack.

“Feed us?” asked Rob Davis.

“Yeah, they kind of knew we were coming and had stuff ready for us when we got there. Simple stuff, but tasted awesome. Some sort of schnitzel I think,” said Nate Clark.

“I haven’t had any decent schnitzel since I lived over here!” exclaimed Amber, suddenly excited.

“And they are cleaning some of our clothes. You mind taking back some laundry with you?” asked Darren.

“What kind of washer?” asked Thomas.

“And actual powered washer and dryer. I was kind of surprised myself,” said Michael.

“Erik?” asked Rick.

“It should be no problem. We can bring back your clothing later,” said Erik.

“Okay guys, just the stuff you need really washed. Underwear, socks and t-shirts. Maybe one uniform if we have enough room,” said Thomas, liking the idea of being able to have fresh clothing.

The groups went about and collected their dirty laundry and brought it back in their waterproof bags. Each had sewn a distinguishing mark into their clothing to be able to tell who’s clothing was who’s when it was all thrown in together into the washer. They didn’t worry about mixing and matching colors as everything was typically dark. The bags were loaded up into the patrol bags of the outgoing teams and lashed to the outside when there was no more space. One set of uniforms were thrown in by everyone into the main rucks after they had been cleared out of the other gear. Again, it was a minor morale item, but morale was crucial to their next mission.

The next two teams departed the location and headed out towards the homes. The two teams parted company near the Kyll River with Thomas heading to Speicher and Rick moving towards Röhl. They agreed to rally back up prior to reentering the bunker at that same spot and moved away from each other silently. The move through the woods was uneventful and the temperatures seemed to be hovering in the upper 30s. It was strange since the weather patterns changed on almost an hourly basis in the area. They found the house on the outskirts of town and went quickly to the back door, not waiting for confirmation. The door opened and a figure in the darkness could be seen waving them forward. The house smelled of something that had been cooked or was cooking and smelled delicious.

“They cooking us up some grub?” asked Greg, putting the customary cigar in his mouth to chomp on. Since being back in the military, he hadn’t taken smoking back up, but had the stereotypical look of the grizzled old veteran who chomped a cigar in his teeth and slowly chewed it away. Only after successful missions would he ever light one up, but for the moment was content to chew one away. The owner of the house, an older gentleman, came up and shook the hands of the Americans after he closed the doors. His wife appeared and gave each of them a hug before motioning them further into the house. It was dark out and the only light save the kitchen was in the living room that was provided by oil lamps.

“*Danke*,” said Thomas in the little German he knew.

“Welcome,” said the man.

“You *sprechen* English?” asked Thomas.

“A little. I owned homes and rented to Americans before *Das Niedergang*. It has been a long time since I have used it,” said the man.

Amber sputtered out a German phrase to the man and his wife, thanking them for their hospitality and their generosity. They were surprised at the German phrases coming from her and told her they appreciated the fact she took the time to learn their language. They invited the four to drop their weapons and gear and start to clean up. More food would be ready in about an hour and they could spend the time until then relaxing and cleaning up. Brian and Greg took the first shift in the shower and dropped their packs to unload before getting out their small ditty kits. Thomas and Amber immediately started gathering the laundry for the couple to wash and relaxed somewhat in the darker interior of the house. The woman brought out fresh baked bread and a small smattering of butter for the two waiting. She collected up the dirty laundry the two had finished up, but Amber helped her along.

They went to the back porch portion of the house and found three washing machines all working at the same time. Three dryers were going as well. Amber asked the woman why they had so many of the washers in the house.

“Before the Muslims came and even before the Fall, my husband owned several pieces of property. And after the Americans left, they left these behind. Instead of letting them go to

waste, we brought them here and eventually found a new job of washing clothes for the local residents. We also wash for the Muslims now and gather information from them as well,” said the woman.

“They come here?” asked Amber.

“Yes, some bring their laundry here to be washed and sit around and drink my husband’s beer. They talk freely among us since they believe we do not understand Arabic. We never let on how much we really know and pass this information on to the resistance. Some of our neighbors think we are collaborators, but we are working to free Germany once again,” said the woman.

“You are very brave,” said Amber.

“It is you who are brave. We have heard of women serving to free our country, but did not believe it until we met the one girl from earlier,” said the woman.

“We do what we must to ensure our family’s safety,” said Amber.

“We thank you for doing this. I never expected to see such lovely women out here before. But the one here before you, she seemed very sad,” said the woman.

“She recently lost her father to the Muslims,” explained Amber.

“I did not know. Please tell her we are sorry and are honored he was killed fighting for our freedom,” said the woman.

“I will tell her,” said Amber.

“And your own father must be worried about you serving,” said the woman.

“My father worries any time I am not in his home,” laughed Amber. “But he is a soldier as well and understands why I do what I do. He is too old to fight, but he teaches others to fight.”

“Any parent would worry about their child being so far away from home. I have a daughter about your age and worry about her constantly. She moved away to Koblenz after completing school and has lived there ever since,” said the woman.

“I hope someday to have children of my own. And I am sure I will worry about them as well,” said Amber with a smile.

“You are married?” asked the woman.

“Yes, he was wounded and sent to America. He is teaching alongside my father,” said Amber.

“We cannot thank you enough for what you do,” said the woman.

“We must thank you as well for the sacrifices you are making and the risks you take,” said Amber.

“We want our nation to be free again,” said the woman.

“And it will be some day, this I swear to you,” said Amber.

“These are yours I suppose?” asked the woman with a laugh as she came across a pair of Amber’s underwear. A gift from Heath, there was little cloth to them, but Amber liked them and referred to them as her “good luck charm.”

“Just because I am a soldier does not mean I stopped being a woman. And we must have comfortable undergarments in order to fight,” laughed Amber.

The woman laughed with Amber and the loads of laundry were thrown into the washers after the others were completed. They continued talking for several minutes while Greg came back into the living room having turned over the bathroom to Brian for the moment and was speaking with Thomas and the Germans. It was simple talk with German interlaced with English during the conversation. Alexander had made the trip with the teams once again and translated when he could. The main meal would be ready after everyone had finished cleaning up. Brian returned from the shower looking like a human being once again after cleaning up and shaving. Greg immediately pounced on the shower and headed towards the bathroom to take his turn.

Amber and the woman returned to the kitchen where a surprise was found. The pork schnitzel was almost done and the woman was finishing up the gravy and the potatoes. It was here that Amber found her surprise.

“I guess I found out where my mother got her secret recipe,” said Amber in English.

“*Vas?*” asked the woman turning away from the stove.

“My mother has a recipe for making her potatoes on the stove like you are doing. She claimed the recipe was a secret handed down through the family. I know where it comes from now,” laughed Amber in German.

“Oh no dear, I learned this from an American when they were stationed here. I have no idea where it comes from,” said the woman.

“Maybe not such a secret after all,” laughed Amber.

Everything was ready and Greg was still in the shower, so the group decided to start without him. It was fairly unusual eating with forks and knives after having rations since the night they had jumped in. But there was nothing unusual about the taste of the breaded meat with gravy and the potatoes on the side and the group wolfed it down in record time. But it was a little gamey tasting and Thomas commented as such.

“The meat is probably wild boar. The area is ridden with them and since the Muslims have prohibited us from growing and marketing pigs, we must hunt them instead,” explained Alexander who translated the question into German.

“I didn’t realize they prohibited the growing of pork here,” said Brian.

“Yes, since we are all supposed to be good little Muslims and convert to their religion, we had to stop keeping them. Pork is illegal in the Islamic religion you know,” said Alexander.

“The same thing kind of happened in America,” said Thomas and remembered the Ranch was growing hogs now. Not only the standard farm hogs, but a few feral ones caught and reintroduced into the sty. Colorado was outside the typical range of the feral hog population in North America, but since the Fall, the animals had ranged further north than usual. The residents didn’t care as long as they continued to put food on the table; however the animals were being a nuisance in the gardens. But that little problem was taken care of by well placed traps and the careful application of a high powered bullet.

“Yes, but fortunately, you did not have to live under their rule for long,” said Alexander.

“Long enough,” said Amber between bites.

The woman reappeared and put out more for the seemingly starving troopers. They weren’t necessarily hungry, but it was just that good. She also let them finish off the potatoes and even brought out some German salad made primarily with cabbage and cucumbers. However, there was a smattering of lettuce as well.

“Where did the fresh vegetables come from?” asked Brian as Greg came to the table and was served.

“The family here is in good standing with the IU. They are what many would call collaborators, but they work for the greater good of Germany. They have access to items most families do not, although they share many of the things taken from the soldiers. However, they cannot let anyone else know about their involvement with us, so by day they are helping the Muslims, but by night, they help us,” explained Alexander.

“And the food?” asked Thomas.

“Grown in greenhouses in the area,” said Alexander. “The same place we steal ours from.”

“Gotcha,” laughed Brian as he finished off his salad before poking at Greg’s dish with a grin on his face. He was threatened with bodily harm or death as a result of it.

Thomas rose to get in the shower and was interrupted by Amber. “But what about ladies first?”

“Normally, yes, but in this case, you will take twice as long as we will. You know I won’t be that long,” said Thomas.

“Oh, that’s just glamorous! I have to go last because I’m a girl,” she groaned.

“I’ll be in and out, wait and see,” said Thomas.

“If you take longer than ten minutes, I’m coming in there with you,” laughed Amber.

“It wouldn’t be the first time you tried,” laughed Thomas.

“Just like old times,” laughed Brian. “Poor Warbucks stuck in a shelter with her for three days.”

“I think I needed counseling after that,” laughed Thomas.

“Okay, you’ve got nine minutes now,” said Amber with a straight face.

“Oh shut it,” said Thomas, getting the last word in before grabbing his ditty, fresh clothing and towel. He shouldn’t have bothered as the woman had already put out clean towels for the four of them as well as washcloths. The washcloths seemed to be a little threadbare, but the towels looked fairly new. He dropped all his clothing on the floor and started warming up the water which he found was an on demand natural gas connection. He had a similar set up at the Ranch recently installed since it saved on the natural gas storage as well as being more practical for living off the grid. Paid for by his paycheck from serving in the military, Sharon had written him a letter telling him how nice they worked.

As he got into the shower, he also remembered hearing of an attack by bandits near the Ranch and how the combined forces of the Dayfield Ranch and the Pueblo Militia had stopped it cold. Also included were the trainees from the Camp Cañon City Mountain Warfare School, recently added since the old mountain warfare training site at Leadville had burned in a forest fire. It was where both Amber’s husband Heath and George Taylor now taught. Thomas still worried about Sharon all the time since he wasn’t there to protect her and his home, but knew she was a “tough old broad” as she referred to herself in letters and could take care of herself. But it didn’t stop him from worrying about her whenever he thought of home.

The hot water was absolutely splendid and he swore he could feel the dirt sliding off his body. It was probably going to be their only opportunity to bathe the entire mission and Thomas didn’t want it to go to waste. But sure enough, at ten minutes after he had been in the shower, the door popped open and Amber called to him.

“Buddy, you’ve got about five minutes before I join you in that shower,” she said.

“Okay, you can scrub my back,” he laughed from the interior of the glassed in shower.

“You don’t think I’m serious do you?” she asked with a laugh.

“Go away and leave me alone. I’m almost finished,” said Thomas with a laugh.

“You’ve got five minutes bud,” she said as she closed the door.

Thomas started to finish up and soaped up once again, enjoying the moment of normalcy. But he also knew Amber needed her turn. But he still wondered what the big rush was since the laundry probably wouldn’t be done for a while. He wrapped the towel around his waist and went over to the small basin and prepared some shaving water. The hair on his face was far longer than usual, but it helped in darkening his face and he didn’t as much camouflage paint as usual. But with shaving, he would have to go back to the full application. The door popped open and Amber came in.

“You are serious aren’t you?” asked Thomas as he washed out the razor and took another swipe at his face. He wasn’t going to stop on her account. And apparently she wasn’t on his either.

“I told you so,” said Amber as she prepared her items.

“You can’t give me like five more minutes?” he asked as she started taking off her boots.

“It’s not like you haven’t seen it before,” she said.

“Yeah, different circumstances and all,” said Thomas.

“Don’t worry sweetie, I won’t be naked until you leave,” she said and doffed everything she could while still being proper.

“You know, people are going to talk about us,” he laughed.

“I just tell them a really naughty story about you trying to take advantage of me in that shelter and they shut up,” she laughed.

“And I thought you were trying to take advantage of me,” laughed Thomas.

“Oh, no! The other way around! Everyone knows how innocent I am,” she said defiantly.

“Yeah right,” laughed Thomas.

“You can’t deny the fact I play a very good innocent act,” she laughed.

“That you do,” said Thomas. “But there is still rumor control and all.”

“Nothing to worry about, the only ones that matter know better,” said Amber.

“That’s true,” said Thomas, looking over his shaving job so far.

“Besides, you’ve got a hot wife waiting at home. Why ruin something with her by messing with me?” she said with a laugh. “Wow! These are real towels for a change!”

“Yeah, beats those micro-fiber ones we use,” said Thomas as he continued to shave. The towels were great for packing up and pulled a lot of water from the body, but there was nothing to compare to a good cotton towel.

“You look like you have lost some weight. Everything okay?” she asked after looking at his midsection. He was in great shape, but was typically a little bulkier than he looked.

“Yeah, you know I typically drop some weight on missions. But I’ll fatten back up after we get back to England,” he said. “Plus this meal tonight hit the spot.”

“I think I could probably live here,” she said. “Good food, nice towels, hot water. What more could I want?”

“Besides our great company?” asked Thomas.

“I dunno, I might trade out the whole lot of you for a decent towel and a hot shower,” she said with a serious tone. However, he saw her face in the mirror and the mirth in her eyes.

“You know, we might trade you off as well. Might only get an IU Credit or so though,” he said. She threw a sock at him to show her displeasure. The two had an unusual relationship for certain and had for a long time. Much like a sibling rivalry or a married couple, the two were completely comfortable around each other. But that was the way most of the team was. Everyone had that one person they were entirely comfortable around.

“Okay mister, you’ve had your time. Close your eyes,” she announced.

“Amber, seriously. Five more minutes,” he said while rolling his eyes. But he could see in the mirror she was not taking the subtle hint and had removed her t-shirt. “At least start the water first and get it warm so you don’t have to wait.”

“Good idea,” she said and popped the water on before continuing her task. It gave him another ten seconds to take another bit of the rough beard off, but since she obviously wasn’t going to wait, he wasn’t going to rush. “Now close your eyes.”

He tolerated her being Amber one last time and closed his eyes. It didn’t take her long to get undressed and into the shower. Thankfully the glass in the shower was fogging up and would be further marred by the frosting. He heard the door close and she announced “you can open your eyes now.”

“The things I put up with out of you,” he said as he continued to finish shaving.

“Ands too,” she said from the shower. He could barely make out her outline, although the noises she was making were far from normal.

“Glamour?” he asked.

“Be quiet! You’re ruining the special moment!” she groaned as the water swept over her. It was the simple things in life that mattered while they were in the field.

He had to laugh and finished shaving before wiping his face of the gel. He noticed he missed a spot and went back over with his razor before pronouncing it decent enough for field conditions. Since they were getting fully cleaned, he used some of the antiperspirant in his kit and applied a small amount so he wouldn’t smell like a goat. He gathered up his clean clothing and started dressing, even with Amber still in the shower.

“You mind if I borrow your razor?” she asked from the shower.

“That’s the only reason you came in here isn’t it?” he asked while pulling on his pants.

“You betcha! Well, also to look at your hot bod,” she laughed.

“You are completely horrible, you know that?” he asked with a laugh.

“That’s not what Heath says. He thinks I’m an angel,” she laughed.

“He and I are going to have a long talk next time we’re home,” said Thomas.

“You love me and you know it,” she said with a laugh.

“It’ll be on the vanity,” he said.

“Wait,” she said and cracked the door a small way and held out her hand. He went over and handed her the small can of gel and the razor before leaving the room to finish up. All that was left was his uniform top and boots. He had collected both sets of dirty laundry to give to the woman and remembered to pay them for their hospitality. He had some silver and gold tokens in his pack for just the occasion. In every war, Americans had carried in “blood chits” to pay the locals and this war was no different than the rest. Just different enemies this time. Well, maybe not different enemies since many historians were starting to consider the “official” start date of the current conflict as 11 September 2001. It wasn’t something he necessarily agreed with, but that was for historians to debate. He had smaller concerns in his mind, like fighting and winning the upcoming battle.

He joined Greg and Brian in the living room area where a nice fire was going in the woodstove and heated the room up. Tea was being served to the group and Thomas saw Greg cleaning his light machine gun. He still had his pistol in case he needed a defensive arm in a hurry and Thomas also knew it would take him about thirty seconds to put the weapon back into firing order. Brian had his own pistol out, an issued Taurus M29 in .45 ACP and was cleaning it as well. Thomas joined in the group and started dismantling his M4A4. It was already relatively clean since he had scrubbed it before leaving England and further wiped it down since being in Germany, but weapons cleanliness was something that would save their lives. The gas piston design lent itself to easy cleaning and the carbon was not built up like it might have been in the standard gas impingement AR system.

The three sat cleaning weapons and talking of little things, nothing specific about their mission since they didn't want to put their team in danger by leaking details the couple might have passed on to the IU in the area. However, Thomas had to know one thing.

"Did you two clowns even try to stop her?" he asked.

"No, why would we do that?" answered Greg with a mischievous smile.

"You two are on my list now," said Thomas with a stern voice, but his eyes didn't convey the anger.

"Since when did we come off your list?" asked Brian as he ran a final patch down the barrel of his pistol before applying the motor oil. The heavyweight synthetic oil was easier to obtain and worked just as good as or better than the issued CLP and the teams made it pretty much standard across the board. In colder temperatures, it took a few rounds to warm up, but after that, it worked great.

"Okay, true, you typically spend your time there. It was just a little unnerving to have her barge in there like that," said Thomas.

"We know there's nothing going on between you two and let's face it, when she gets determined nobody's going to stop her," said Brian.

"Yeah, true," said Thomas as he wiped at the bolt of the carbine.

"But other than that, the first loads of laundry are ready to pack up and take back. Unfortunately, ours is next on the list," said Greg.

"About how long?" asked Thomas.

"Maybe another hour on the first load. I think there is another single load after that," said Greg.

"We can bring it to you when it is done," said Alexander, joining the group and taking out the vintage FN Hi-Power pistol to clean.

"Kind of unusual to be carrying around. Where did you get it from?" asked Brian.

"It was the pistol of the first sniper I killed from the IU. You find the IU soldiers carrying them from time to time so I can get replacement magazines. Some officers, but most of them carry the Glocks," said Alexander.

"My wife likes the Browning," said Brian.

"She is a smart woman. *Herr* Browning created a masterpiece when he designed this pistol," said Alexander.

“You seem to know a lot about guns,” said Thomas.

“It is a hobby of mine, although I wasn’t ever able to own any before the Fall. But in the aftermath, I discovered my talents as a shooter,” said Alexander.

“How often does the IU put sniper teams out to look for you?” asked Greg.

“Not often. They are playing on our home field so to speak and we see them before they see us. But recently they have gotten better. We think there is a new sniper in the area who is teaching them to be better. We have had several resistance members killed at extremely long ranges. Ranges far beyond what the IU is typically shooting at. We haven’t found out for certain if he is just that good or that lucky,” said Alexander.

“Long range shooting is rarely luck,” said Thomas. “He has become a problem?”

“Somewhat. He is not out often, but we think he might be training the local snipers in the units,” said Alexander.

“Something to keep a watchful eye for,” said Brian as he disassembled his carbine. “Maybe Demo and this guy should meet.”

“Let’s hope he is too busy to come after us. The IU puts out some good snipers from time to time,” said Thomas, thinking of the one in North Carolina that had picked off three AFNAS sniper teams in one day. And done it alone.

“Let’s go ahead and start packing up the laundry when you get done cleaning your weapons,” said Thomas as he finished oiling up his carbine and put it back together. They would attempt to wait on everything to get cleaned before leaving. They didn’t want to risk the German couple any more than necessary and they would have a hard time answering questions of why they had FNC uniforms and clothing items in their house in case it was found. The packs were already bare bones as it was, although Thomas and Brian had carried their rucks as well for additional space. The first set of laundry was sorted by owner and put into the waterproof compression bags before being cinched down and stowed away. Again, it was a morale item and they all knew it was better to have good morale than not.

While they were packing the things away, Amber came back into the living room and announced “It’s official; I’m becoming a German and living here.”

“And when the IU comes and takes you away for one of their special camps?” asked Alexander.

“Okay, maybe I’ve got it good where I’m at,” laughed Amber.

The German woman appeared and announced the rest of the laundry would be done in about forty-five minutes and for them to relax in the meantime. She brought out another load which was sorted and packed away. And so they waited for the rest of the laundry to complete and

travel the short distance back to the bunker where the mission would be planned out to the smallest detail.

“Sir? Major? SIR?!” said the IU Sergeant a little louder than usual as he was trying to awaken the Major.

“Yes, what is it?” said the Major irately.

“Sir, you ordered us to inform you the moment the autopsy results came in from Frankfurt,” said the Sergeant.

“Yes, yes I did,” said the Major as he wiped the sleep from his eyes. “Do you have it with you?”

The Sergeant handed over a folder with the autopsy reports from the dead soldiers on the roadside ambush. The Major sped read it line by line, right to left and got to the important part. “Has this been confirmed?”

“The doctor I spoke with in Frankfurt said they were sending off their results to another hospital for confirmation, but he was reasonably certain,” said the Sergeant.

“Did you read this?” asked the Major.

“Yes sir,” said the Sergeant.

“Even though you are not cleared to?” asked the Major.

“I needed to be certain it was worth waking you for,” said the Sergeant.

“Someday you will make a good officer, Rafi. I will see to it you are promoted for looking out for my well being,” chuckled the Major. “What do you think of this?”

“Sir, probably the same thing you thought of this. We have a special forces team on the ground here,” said the Sergeant.

“I want every bit of unusual intelligence data collected and ready for my review first thing in the morning. And I mean anything out of the ordinary,” said the Major.

“Should we put out an alert sir?” asked the Sergeant.

“No, not until we have had the opportunity to analyze the data. By analyzing everything we have, we might be able to find the target and head them off. But we need everything before that happens,” said the Major.

“It will be done sir,” said the Sergeant.

The Major watched him leave his room in the old lodging building before rolling over and attempting to go back to sleep. But it wouldn’t come as he continued to think of the data received from the autopsy of the dead soldiers from the ambush. He tossed and turned, but the same thoughts continued to enter his head. They had an FNC team on the ground and they had a target in mind. And his job was to identify that target in advance and provide warning for the security in the area. But the hardest part was identifying the target in advance. There was only one extremely valuable target he continued to think about and knew it was tragically undermanned...

“Please tell them we cannot thank them enough for their hospitality,” said Thomas to Alexander as they prepared to leave. He had already pulled out the small package containing the silver tokens to pass several over.

Alexander translated the message while Thomas ripped the plastic from three of them and started to hand them over. The couple politely refused them with waved hands and spoke a long sentence in German.

“They say it is not necessary. What you do is for Germany and they are grateful to help,” said Alexander.

“Tell them I have already removed the plastic away from these tokens and I cannot carry them. They will make too much noise if I do,” said Thomas.

Alexander translated it and the German couple had a look on their face knowing he had done so on purpose. But they did not refuse the payment of services rendered and took the tokens away from Thomas in a handshake. The woman hugged each of them and told Amber something in German before giving her a kiss on both cheeks. Amber replied and the woman’s eyes filled with tears as she gave them a quick “*Schönen Abend noch*” as they departed. Amber added in a “*Gleichfalls*” and “*Tschüs*” as they left with a smile. The fire team nodded one last time and departed the house from the rear, traveling quietly towards into the nearby woods.

“What did she tell you before we left?” asked Thomas before they got too far to ask.

“She told me I was too beautiful to be fighting and I should go back home and raise children to fight instead. I told her I was fighting so my children wouldn’t have to,” said Amber.

“Some good advice,” said Thomas as he remembered he was fighting to protect Sharon, Angel, Brent and Hope. And the millions of other children in North America and the rest of the world he had never met, but swore to protect.

The team moved silently into the woods and continued walking towards the bunker area, although not in a direct line towards it. Alexander and Brian were up front with Alexander wearing a borrowed set of night vision. Suddenly Brian's hand came up in a raised palm and then quickly went to a clinched fist. The remainder of the team quickly went towards the nearest cover and watched their assigned sectors of fire. Something was moving in the forest towards them. They could hear it, but not see it.

Brian intently scanned ahead of them, trying to locate the source of the noise. He was unsuccessful but continued to watch for movement in the night vision. The noise suddenly stopped somewhere to their front and it sounded as if the ground was being scratched at. A grunting was heard and Brian thought he could see a form digging at the ground. He moved slightly to the side and the image suddenly turned into a wild boar rooting at the ground trying to find something to eat. It apparently hadn't been alerted to the team's presence yet and continued its task of feeding.

"It's clear, it's only a boar," said Brian quietly behind him. But apparently the boar heard it as well and perceived the group to be a threat to its meal. It stopped and intently looked in the direction of the group before grunting once again and peering around. Before they had a chance to react, the large animal started charging them. But training took over and Brian aimed his rifle at the approaching animal and provided enough lead. His shots were muffled by the suppressor fitted to the end of the muzzle and the sound wouldn't travel like normal shots would. He saw a hit and another, but the animal kept coming. He fired once again before the animal seemed stunned enough to slow down. Brian placed one more shot for good measure into the head area before it collapsed about twenty feet to their front.

Walking slowly forward with Alexander, they saw the boar was still not dead and Brian delivered the final shot to the head. The tusks were fairly large on the now dead boar and Alexander immediately identified it as a male.

"About two hundred kilos, maybe a bit more. Nice job," said Alexander.

"Too bad we don't have a big barbeque pit around here," said Brian.

"Can you mark this position on your device?" asked Alexander.

"Yes, we can," said Brian.

"I will send someone back to retrieve the carcass when we return. This can feed several families," said Alexander. "And of course a meal for you as well."

"I just didn't want that thing hitting me with the tusks," said Brian, a little worried after the close call.

"We should continue quickly just in case the gunfire attracted attention," said Alexander.

Brian took one last look at the large animal and remembered sometimes danger in the forest came on four legs instead of two. He marked the position on his GPS and they continued towards the bunker, making two doglegs on their course in case they were being followed. They even doubled back once to make sure they weren't being tracked by anyone. Arriving at the rally point, Alexander was challenged and responded correctly by one of the other Germans with Rob Davis backing him up. They found Rick and his team had been patiently waiting for the better part of an hour before moving back to the bunker. The two teams left silently towards the bunker and relative safety for the moment.

The aircrew was sitting in what appeared to be a decently sized barn. They had spent the day there under the watchful eyes of their new German friends and had caught sleep when they could. But even so, they posted a watch just in case they had been double crossed. Throughout the day, the Germans had attempted to communicate, but the German phrases were lost on the group of Americans and the Germans had to use hand signals and body language to get them to stay.

The leader from the night before reappeared and brought the aircrew's gear with him after having been searched thoroughly for any device which might have transmitted their locations. The survival radios had all been confiscated and the batteries taken out just in case they were transmitting anything. The group was glad to have their gear and with the frustrating lack of communication, the pilot finally started digging into the survival kit looking for the "pointy-talky" sheet. It had been designed and written by the pilot very hastily since the cards were in short supply when the bombing of the European mainland began. Since that time, the "official" cards had come out, but the aircrew had yet to replace the ones they came up with in their survival packs.

"Ernst is coming soon. Maybe he can talk to these Americans," said the second in charge.

"I hope so. Their German is horrid," said the leader.

"And your English is no better," chuckled the second.

The pilot finally found the small cloth with the simple German phrases on it and pulled it out. Going over to the leader, the rest instantly went on edge.

"Whoa guys, I've got my German translation thing here," said the pilot, waving the piece of laminated paper. The leader came over to see what the fuss was about.

The pilot went down the list and found the appropriate phrase "I am an American" and pointed at it. Next to it was the German translation.

“It says they are Americans,” said the leader in German with a laugh. “As if we did not know that already.”

The pilot continued down the list and found the next phrase “Can you please help us?”

The leader looked at the phrase and took the paper away from the pilot. After examining it for several moments he quickly came to the deduction of “It looks like a five year old child wrote these translations.”

“What do they want?” asked another German.

“I do not know,” said the leader as he looked over the list of German phrases and couldn’t find what he was looking for. The pilot took it back and pointed at three phrases.

“They want to know if we have forage...I believe this is supposed to be food and *geissen*...pour? I think they are asking for food and water. The next question is asking for beer and they are willing to pay for it. I believe for some reason the translations might be wrong here. With translations like these, we might be at war with the Americans soon,” chuckled the leader. “Go and find something for them to eat and drink. No beer though, I want them clear headed when Ernst arrives.”

Two members of the Daun Resistance disappeared and went to find something to eat for the aircrew. The leader found the appropriate English phrases and showed the pilot. The two groups sat there watching each other until the two arrived with something for the crew. It was bread, a small amount of chicken and water, but it was like a five star banquet after living on the survival rations for the past few days. And a little butter helped out a lot with the bread. The aircrew divided it up equally and wolfed it down.

“They appear hungry,” said the second German to the leader.

“I am sure they did not carry enough food for an extended stay. And we tried some of the American emergency rations once when they dropped them in. I probably would rather starve before eating those,” said the leader. Another German appeared and went to the leader.

“Who are they?” asked Ernst in German.

“American pilots. Probably the ones we were asked to look for,” said the leader. “You speak English. Find out who they are and where they were going.”

“Hello, my name is Ernst. I speak English,” said Ernst as he walked over to the group.

“Oh thank God. We are American pilots and were shot down several days ago. We are looking for help from the German Resistance and want to alert our headquarters and schedule a rescue attempt,” said the pilot quickly.

“I have not used my English in a long time. Can you please speak slower?” asked Ernst.

The pilot repeated the request slower and waited for an answer. “You have the most horrible accent I have ever heard on an American. Where are you from?” asked Ernst.

“Alabama,” stated the pilot very proudly.

“Don’t worry Mister, we can’t understand a word either,” laughed the OSO who was from Georgia and had a pretty bad accent as well.

“We are the German Freedom Fighters from Daun. We were alerted to your presence several days ago,” said Ernst, ignoring the comment.

“Alerted by whom?” asked the pilot.

“Another group. Where they found this information, I do not know. How can we help you?” asked Ernst.

“We were looking to travel closer to the coast and arrange for a rescue mission. Would you be able to help us?” asked the pilot.

“I do not know. We rarely travel past our area of responsibility since it is forbidden by the Islamic Union. And the fact we cause enough trouble within our area to begin with. We can try though and relay messages to other groups to see if they will help get you to a suitable rescue point,” said Ernst.

“We can pay,” said the copilot, reaching in and pulling out the silver and gold sovereigns from the survival kit.

“This might help to...bribe I think is the word, bribe the Muslim soldiers to get you to where you need to go,” said Ernst. “But we do not need the money.”

“What do ya’ll use for bribes in your area?” asked the pilot, the Alabama accent even heavier than usual.

“We use beer and alcohol. The Muslims have grown a taste for our beer,” said Ernst with a laugh.

“And I thought it was against their religion,” said the OSO.

“Sometimes they are not so religious. Where would be a good place to go?” asked Ernst.

“Someplace closer to the coast. Would that be hard to get to?” asked the pilot.

“Maybe...we must coordinate with the other groups in the area and see if they can take you safely through their zones,” said Ernst.

“How long will that take?” asked the OSO.

“Maybe a day or two. Are you comfortable here?” asked Ernst.

“It is okay, but was a little cold last night,” said the co-pilot.

“We can see to it more blankets are brought out, but we cannot risk a fire in here,” said Ernst.

“We understand,” said the DSO. “We appreciate you helping us.”

“It is no problem. We are going to see you get home,” said Ernst.

The group of four grinned at that announcement and started feeling a little better about their situation. “Anything else?” asked Ernst.

“Possibly more food?” asked the pilot.

“We can bring more out, but we do not have much to spare. The winter has been harsh,” said Ernst.

“We can use our rations then,” said the pilot. “Just some water would help.”

“I do not know how you will survive on those rations. They are horrible. But we will see what food we can come up with,” said Ernst and turned back to the resistance leader and spoke in German. “What now?”

“Now we contact the Speicher group and let them know we have found their pilots,” said the leader.

“How did they know to look for them when they crashed in our area?” asked Ernst.

“I do not know, but I do not believe it is a coincidence of them asking for our assistance in attacking the Daun garrison and the air base. I believe they are hiding something or someone from us, but probably with good reason,” said the leader.

“And then?” asked Ernst.

“Then we will see if they know where to take these Americans to,” said the leader. “And we will do our best to help them.”

“Would they help us?” asked Ernst.

“Yes, they have before and I assume they will again. They did give us that mortar and the rounds two months ago,” said the leader.

“How long before we know so I might tell the Americans?” asked Ernst.

“I do not know and they do not need to know. The less they know of us the better, to include our communications,” said the leader. “But the operations planned with Speicher and the other groups are due to go off in the next couple of days. I suspect we will hear from them in short order.”

“The thing was huge!” exclaimed Brian.

“It was tiny and you got scared,” laughed Greg.

“Four hundred pounds isn’t tiny by any means!” exclaimed Brian.

“Yes and I once caught a fish this big,” laughed Alexander as he joined in the poking and held out his hands about three feet apart.

“Oh yeah! You guys were the one that wants to keep it!” exclaimed Brian.

“Why yes, I wanted a piece of sausage with breakfast. And that is about as much as we could get off it,” laughed Thomas.

“You guys are unbelievable!” exclaimed Brian.

“Anything else happen out there?” asked Darren.

“Nah, everything went just fine except for our encounter with the pig,” said Thomas as he was handing out the clean laundry. Everyone was in pretty high spirits over getting the opportunity to get cleaned up and have clean clothing.

“When do you want to start the planning?” asked Michael.

“When everyone gets repacked. I’m thinking the mission needs to go down in the next two days,” said Thomas. “I got a weather dump while we were out and it looks like conditions will be good. Near freezing at night, but not too bad. Makes them less alert, but we will be okay. Partly cloudy so their night vision won’t work as well as ours. All we need now is a plan and a time and we go for it.”

“We were doing a little planning while you were gone and made a few refinements to your overall plan to include adding in the Germans. Otherwise, we were waiting for everyone to get back before making any serious plans,” said Darren.

“Sounds good. Let’s give everyone another half hour to pack and get everyone gathered up in one of the side rooms along with Erik. Is he around?” asked Thomas.

“Yeah, asleep in the command room again,” said Darren.

“Must be hard leading a double life,” said Thomas.

“We do it too,” said Darren as he watched three Germans leaving to butcher the boar and take the meat to some of the local homes. “Got my stuff?”

“How much money do you have?” joked Thomas.

“The same as you, five gold tokens and ten silver ones,” said Darren.

“Actually, I need one of your silver ones and one from someone else to make it even. I gave the family three for their hospitality,” said Thomas as he handed over the cinch bag to Darren.

“Feeling magnanimous?” asked Darren as he dug around in his pack and handed over the token.

“That’s the least we could do,” said Thomas as he started repacking his own items into the areas he wanted them. Darren had already made room for the clothing and knew exactly where he wanted it put. The remainder of the group was quickly repacking and getting their items back into order. Everyone seemed to be in high spirits and the mood was catching as even the Germans were grinning about the situation. As everyone finished packing, they started gathering their notepads and moving to the other room to discuss the mission.

The final stages of planning were about to begin and the mission finally realized. The team was riding on the crest of a wave and knew nothing could ever stop them.

CHAPTER 15 – POSITIONING

Date/Time: 18 March/0243

Location: German Resistance Bunker, Near Speicher, Occupied Germany

“We are looking at what? Two roving patrols, four observation posts with two people and a couple of guys at the door? How many exterior?” asked Rob Davis.

“Dismounted patrols around the exterior, two to four people per, most likely two, but sometimes four, say about a third of the time. Observation posts only have one, but they rotate throughout the day. Guys at the door vary, but mainly two unless someone is from the inside visiting,” said Darren.

“But there is the possibility of that third OP on top of the building. The one we never were sure about since we didn’t come that close,” said Jeremy.

“It would be a perfect place to put one. Three-sixty view of the approaches,” admitted Rick.

“Maybe a final denial position? Machine gun or sniper hide?” asked Heather Davis.

“Maybe not a sniper hide, but I could buy an MG, likely a SAW,” said Frank.

“Why not a sniper hide?” asked Thomas.

“Too obvious. Snipers need the ability to shoot and move. The entire area around this is void of vegetation. He shoots two, three, maybe four times max before someone brackets him. After that, he turns into a normal rifleman,” said Nancy agreeing with Frank.

“And it would be hard to conceal a heavy machine gun up there. Not impossible, but we probably would have picked up on it,” said Jeremy.

“Okay, so call this point a fifth observation point with worst case a medium machine gun. The rovers are pretty regular based on the intel report, is there something we can exploit?” asked Rick.

“Maybe. Yeah, they have set trails and regular patterns. But when they aren’t out patrolling, they are at the entrance or inside. Might want to wait until they are all outside and hit them there. Easier to do out in the open rather than dig them out of the tunnels or rooms,” said Jeremy.

“So one person per OP and two people for the rovers. Anyone have a problem with that?” asked Thomas.

“No, that should be plenty,” said Darren. “Besides, we know the locations of the observation posts and sneaking up on them should be child’s play.”

“Take the rovers down and the observation posts and all we have to deal with are the security personnel inside,” said Scott. “By the looks of it, we only have...a platoon at most to deal with anyway.”

“Well, adding in the folks on the inside as well. They will probably have some arms stored on the interior,” said Martin.

“Half their guard force is on the exterior at any given point in time,” said Amber. “Ten people in the observation posts, four to eight on their roving patrols and two guys at the door. Speaking of which, do they have an alternate exit?”

“None that we could find. Erik?” asked Darren.

“This may be here,” said Erik looking at the detailed aerial shots of the area and pointing. “If anything it is a shaft with a ladder of some kind as it is vertical.”

“Emergency escape hatch of some kind?” asked Nate.

“Probably so,” said Erik. “I can put my own people here along with a surprise.”

“What kind of surprise?” asked Greg.

“If they open the cover, we will send down gasoline or diesel and then a grenade. There are cans of one or the other here,” he said pointing at the map and cross referencing it with the patrol reports.

“They always seemed to top them off when they emptied one,” admitted Darren.

“And it’s not that far to carry them. Okay, your surprise is a go,” said Thomas. “Put two folks on it. Now something else I was thinking. They do a guard force rotation in the morning, but the duty crew shifts over at 2300 and finishes up by midnight. I’m thinking we could get two crews at one time if we went around that time.”

The rest of the team thought about it. “It does put twice the normal amount of troops on the ground at one time,” said Michael.

“But not normal infantry. These guys are probably used to the nice life, inside in the heat and patching through Achmed to his higher headquarters. I doubt very seriously they are used to fighting experienced ground troops,” said Willy.

“Let’s not assume that. But they prop the door open for almost an hour when the crew gets there and security on the bus is minimal. Four guards max. I’m thinking I like this idea just because the door is open and we don’t have to try and blast through which takes more time,” said Frank.

“Is the bus armored?” asked Brian.

“No, just a typical bus. Well, no, I remember them having bars and screens over the windows,” said Frank.

“From the locals throwing rocks at the busses from time to time,” said Alexander.

“No fire exits?” asked Nate.

“Only the front and back doors. Now that I remember, the bars go past the windows and won’t allow escape,” said Martin.

“That changes things. We hit them still on the bus and cover both doors. I like it,” said Heather.

“Hit them right when they pull up to the door, hit the observation posts and rovers just before with suppressed weapons fire. Lambs to the slaughter,” said Greg as he moved his cigar around in his mouth.

“That thing’s quite glamorous,” laughed Amber. “No wonder Amy gives you down the road.”

Greg pulled the stub out of his mouth and replaced it with a fresh one. “Happy now?”

“Don’t expect any of us to give you mouth to mouth,” laughed Rick and was joined by the rest of the group save Nancy.

“I like the idea of hitting two crews at once. One, it prevents them from getting the bunker back up and running in a short time. Two, it may only be two crews trained at that site and if we take out the entire staff in one hit, good for us. Three, they open the door and we aren’t forced to try to blast it open and give them time to get ready for us to come in for tea and crumpets,” said Scott.

“So we are all in agreement of hitting both crews at once?” asked Thomas. “Anyone want to put in the contrary opinion?”

“I have to say it’s slightly more dangerous. What kind of weapons are the relief crews armed with?” asked Heather.

“We saw a few pistols and rifles, but nothing major. Say about a dozen out of the thirty,” said Martin.

“And if we hit them still on the bus, it will be hard for them to react. No place to go if we hit them hard and fast,” said Rob.

“Alright, let’s plan this out. Snoopy, your team covers the door and takes out the guards there and prevents it from closing. Rocky, you and Trouble take out roving force one. If they stick to

predictable patterns, which the recon says they probably will, that will put them about right here. You hit them and get back to the entrance. Badaa and Kodak, you've got rover team two which should be around here," said Thomas pointing at the map once again. "Hit hard and get back."

"Tattoo, you take OP 1 here. Shouldn't be hard to get back to us before the bus gets here. Baldy, Guns, you have OP 2 and 3. Token and Giggles, OP 4 and let's call this OP 5 on top of the bunker itself. It puts you two right in the perfect position for an ambush on the bus. Erik, you have your folks ready to engage any follow on forces and put them in position to cover the escape hatch. Baldy and Guns will join up with you here," said Thomas again pointing at the map.

"Sounds fairly decent and not really a change from what we looked at before. I'm liking it," said Rick.

"Yeah, this can work. Erik, your folks will remain behind as a reserve force until we get into the bunker; then move to cover us while we are on the inside," said Michael.

"Yes, we can do this," said Erik, but wishing his personnel could take more of a direct action against the IU invaders.

"How many will you need?" asked Thomas.

"I will say a dozen of my best men. That should give us enough to keep what soldiers busy. How long will you be on the inside?" asked Erik.

"I don't know. It depends on the extent of the complex," said Darren.

"But once we place the charges, we are out of there in a heartbeat," said Heather. "We set the charges at fifteen minutes and it should give us enough time to get away."

"What happens after we clear the interior?" asked Brian.

"We begin our ex-fil to Belgium, speaking of which, you promised transportation. Any progress on that?" asked Thomas.

"Yes, we know what we will be doing," said Erik.

"We have our pick up zone already established. But there is a serious problem, it's pretty far away," said Darren.

"How far is pretty far?" asked Erik.

"Saint Vith in Belgium," answered Darren.

"Oh, we thought it changed. Yes, we already knew this and have plans to get you there," said Erik.

“Care to let us in on them?” asked Michael.

“Very easy; we go by truck,” said Erik.

“By truck? And we are sure to be stopped?” asked Michael, but meaning the question to be more of a statement.

“I will show you,” said Erik as he went to a shelf and pulled down a large map of the area.

“Basically, it is set on certain things happening for us to get you there. After the diversion at the air bases and the local garrisons, the outlying posts will be pulled back. They have always done it in the past after we attacked the bases so there is no reason they will not do it this time. After that occurs, we will put your team in two trucks that already have forged papers for transport to Saint Vith. But the landing zone is not really in Saint Vith, but just on the other side of the border near what used to be these two villages here,” he said as he pointed at the map.

“Used to be there?” asked Darren.

“After several of the attacks by the Belgian resistance, the IU decided to ‘teach them a lesson,’ and destroyed several villages with artillery and tank fire. They were destroyed and everyone killed. It did not have the intended outcome they desired and strengthened the resolve of the resistance instead. And now? They have far more recruits than they have weapons for. But this is not what we are talking about.”

“We already have two trucks that can be used to take your team almost all the way there. We will have to stop before going across the border since it is heavily manned and if we are detected we will not be able to escape. So the plan is to stop near the border and cross on foot,” explained Erik.

“How far on foot are we talking about?” asked Thomas.

“Maybe ten to fifteen kilometers to cross the border. After that it depends on your pick up location,” said Erik.

“How good are your contacts with the Belgian resistance?” asked Michael.

“Not so good, but the Prüm resistance has good contacts on the other side of the border,” said Erik. “We have already contacted them in this matter.”

“And they said?” asked Darren, who joined the conversation after waking up.

“They said it would be no problem getting you there,” said Erik.

“And the truck drivers?” asked Michael.

“Two Turks from a local village. They are part of the IU auxiliary in the local area,” said Erik.

“And they aren’t a risk?” demanded Rick.

“Not since the IU raped and killed their sister. She lived in a different town and the IU never made the connection with her family. Trust me, they have been providing us data since it happened and are fully on our side,” said Erik.

“Any reason not to trust them?” asked Thomas, not really liking the idea.

“None whatsoever. They have been inside this bunker numerous times even. They want the IU gone just as bad as we do,” said Erik.

“I don’t like this boss,” said Michael.

“I don’t really either,” said Scott.

“You have trusted me this far, why not now?” asked Erik, slightly offended.

“It’s not you, but it’s the drivers. I don’t believe anyone will just change sides like that,” said Darren reasonably.

“No, they have worked with us far before the Fall. We have used them countless times and they are fully on our side,” said Erik. “You trust me to protect you while you are in the bunker, why not now?”

“It’s the point that they are Muslims and well, you know?” said Greg.

“They are not Muslims actually. They came from Turkey well before the Fall and became Christian. Is that not good enough for you?” asked Erik.

The group pondered that statement for a couple of moments before Frank spoke. “If they trust them why wouldn’t we?”

“Good point. I mean, we use Turks and other Muslims at home base to help out and have worked with renegade Muslims in the past. Is this any different?” asked Amber.

“No, not really,” said Thomas thoughtfully. “Any other dissenting opinions?”

“No, now that we put it into perspective, it does make sense. Also, we take the hide in plain sight approach to this. The IU won’t expect us to make our getaway by driving up the Autobahn,” said Darren.

“We are putting our lives in your hands, understand? If these two suddenly have sympathy for the IU, we are as good as dead,” said Greg.

“I understand and would not put you in danger like that,” said Erik.

“They don’t learn anything about us until we get on the trucks. They are told to get into a position to carry people, but they don’t know when or where to. And just them, nobody else. Everyone agrees to that?” asked Thomas.

The rest of the group nodded and Erik agreed to the idea. “This was our plan from the beginning. We were going to have them waiting in Zemmer for us. The route we planned takes us away from the traffic control station at Landscheid and on the back roads. We shouldn’t have a problem until we get towards Prüm,” said Erik. “And by then, you should plan on walking the rest of the distance on foot.”

“This was already in the plans anyway,” said Darren.

“We will pass a message to the Prüm resistance to have them ready to escort us across the border,” said Erik. “When will they need to be ready?”

“Tell them starting tonight and going for the next two weeks,” said Rick.

“Speaking of which, when are we planning on doing all this?” asked Brian.

“Sooner the better. I say tonight or tomorrow at the latest,” said Martin.

“I agree although tonight might be a little difficult,” said Rob.

“Yeah, tomorrow gives us plenty of time to get everything in order and send off a message to England for the pickup,” said Brian.

“Erik? Any problem with that?” asked Darren.

“No, my people can be made ready in less than an hour. And also, tomorrow gives us time to send out the message about the additional attacks to cover this mission,” said Erik.

“This is starting to sound like a plan,” laughed Michael.

“Plenty of details still to be worked out,” said Nancy.

“Yeah, Erik, you want to let your folks know we are going tomorrow night around twenty-three hundred. They start their attacks fifteen minutes after that,” said Thomas.

Erik yelled in German to a member in the command center and had them appear. He spat out the orders in German and waved them away. The message would spread quicker than the Americans expected. The group spent the next few hours planning the attacks out to every detail to include the escape of the group and plans in case they didn’t make it. No stone was left unturned and everyone had a say in the plan. It was close to dawn when they finally finished up. One of the Germans came in to brief Erik.

“Landscheid, Wittlich and Bitburg have already gotten back with us. They agree to the timeline,” said Erik.

“And the others?” asked Heather.

“They will probably pass messages throughout today and tonight,” said Erik.

“Okay, last minute inputs,” said Thomas as he went around the group. “Demo?”

“Nope, everything looks sound,” said Frank.

“Snoopy?” asked Thomas.

“No, I think we have a winner here,” said Darren. “Movement time?”

“Tonight. We will approach the site and remain overnight or rather over day at an area nearby and to be determined. But just in case, Badaa, you take your team in advance and sweep the patrol route,” said Thomas. “That should give us plenty of time to make our moves and get into position. Everyone agree to that?”

There were no dissenting opinions and Thomas continued to his left with everyone, ending up with Nancy. “Giggles?”

“No, I can’t think of anything that will make this better except air support,” she admitted. “But I think the chances of that are slim.”

“It’s something we can put in a request for in the next message,” said Thomas. “Token, you and Giggles mind heading out to send a message?”

“Nah, piece of cake,” said Michael. Thomas was already busy typing out the message on his communicator and would send it to Michael’s before he left the room. With the bunker being so far underground, there was little chance of the transmission penetrating the earth, concrete and steel to make it to the surface.

“Okay, let’s get some sleep. Tonight we go through mission prep and get everything ready to move,” said Darren, taking over for Thomas as he formatted his message. Everything was ready and sent to Michael’s communicator. He and Nancy went to their room to prepare to move a short distance and send their message.

“I don’t like the name Giggles. I want something new,” said Nancy away from the group as they grabbed their patrol packs.

“Why not?” asked Michael.

“I just don’t think it fits me anymore. Yeah, I used to be silly and giggle a lot, but not anymore,” said Nancy.

“And we wish you might go back to being that same person we knew before. We all know your loss and wish it never happened, but you cannot carry it around for the rest of your life. We all remember when you used to laugh at the smallest of items and it kept our spirits high. Just to hear you giggle was uplifting to us all and we knew there was always something to laugh about in the world,” said Michael.

“Not anymore,” said Nancy.

“Oh, I think there are always things to laugh about. Give it time, it’s a great healer,” said Michael.

“Well, would you all consider it when we get back to England?” asked Nancy.

“Why don’t you ask us when we get back and think about it for a while,” suggested Michael.

“I will...and yes, I will concentrate on the mission here and now and not worry about something so trivial,” she said with a straight face.

Michael half expected her to break out a trademark grin at the last sentence, but her expression was one of seriousness. They had all hoped she might start putting the past behind her somewhat, but as he said, it would take time.

They were joined by two Germans to act as ground guides and would be taken close to Preist to relay their message and receive incoming packets.

Date/Time: 18 March/0727

Location: Base Headquarters, Spangdahlem Air Base, Occupied Germany

“General, thank you for granting me this meeting,” said the Major in charge of the intelligence in the local area.

“Any time, Major. Your ideas and intelligence analysis is always welcome here,” said the General as he waved the Major to seat.

“I always try to give you the best intelligence I can, sir,” said the Major. “And this is another one of those times.”

“Explain,” said the General. As usual, the Major got right down to the point of the matter, something the General appreciated.

“I believe there is something unusual going on in the local area. I have researched the pertinent information and attempted to tie it all together into what I believe might be happening,” said the Major.

“And your analysis indicated?” asked the General.

“I believe we face a strike of some sort from a special operations team in conjunction with the local resistance against the communications center,” said the Major.

“And how did you arrive at this deduction?” asked the General.

“It might take me a couple of minutes to explain everything and some of the data is based on assumptions,” said the Major.

“Which your assumptions have been right far more than wrong Major. Please give me everything you have,” said the General. The Major set everything out in order to be briefed and handed over the first packet to the General.

“What set everything off was the major airstrikes we had recently. Everything started up after that. These strikes emboldened the resistance and insurgents in the area, which in itself was not unusual, but things that happened afterwards were. The attacks were far larger than before and in their current operations. We know they are planning the cross Channel invasion into Northern France and most of their efforts have been directed at the bases nearer the coast. But these things do happen and possibly they ran out of large targets near the coast. But more on that later,” he said, leaving the current thoughts with the General.

“Next we had a secure transmission about right here,” said the Major as he pointed at a map of the area he had brought in. “This message was short and very secure. Far more secure and shorter than the messages we have seen the insurgents use so far. Our detection equipment barely had time to catch it and have been unsuccessful in decoding it so far. However, they know it was a data transmission and not a voice transmission. Most of the communications from the resistance have been voice transmissions. We have also picked up this signal two other times.”

“The strange part of this is the fact there was a company on maneuvers very close to the location of the original transmission as best as we can tell. They were performing dismounted training and sweeps north of Speicher and towards Beilingen. The fact this transmission came from either in the middle of the patrol or close enough to it tells me these are very brave soldiers,” said the Major.

“Is there a chance we have a spy in that company?” asked the General.

“Possibly, but these soldiers have been here for well over a year now and this is the first time we have ever seen this type of transmission here. We would have noticed it before now if they were transmitting anything from the local area. However, it has been noted in other locations in Europe and typically in those where FNC Special Forces have struck. This one is slightly different though and it may be an upgrade to their communications technology,” said the Major.

The General thought about that hypothesis for a moment and decided the Major had a good reason and sound judgment for making a guess. “You have proved your point so far, please continue Major.”

“Yes, sir. And then we have the four soldiers killed at the communications bunker itself recently. This was not specifically unusual except the fact the resistance had mainly been avoiding the area for the past year or so. We don’t know why they were avoiding it, but strikes against targets of opportunity at the location were nonexistent for the past eight months and only one in the past fourteen months. This happened around here,” he said as he paused to find the spot on the map. “Far away from the area of the transmission. But I believe it is linked. The bodies were sent to the central barracks in Frankfurt for autopsy and we just got the results back.”

“The results show not only were our calibers used, but standard FNC calibers as well. One was hit with .40 caliber rounds and another was a 5.56mm type and specifically the type favored by their special operations units. Also the bodies from the roadside ambush were autopsied and they had similar rounds as well as a sniper round from one of their larger caliber weapons. We are not certain, but this would be the first time we have seen the resistance use a precision rifle designed by the FNC. We have never seen any sniper rifles or rounds dropped in the usual supply shipments, but there is always this possibility.”

“We also have rumors of the insurgents looking for the aircrew of that downed bomber...here. And two soldiers, one of our tracking teams, killed here by small arms fire.” he said, circling an area on the map and also pointing. “The soldiers were stripped of weapons and equipment so the officers in charge thought nothing of it since this is a typical insurgent tactic. But I saw the bodies myself and found the wounds were not consistent with the weapons typically used by the resistance. The caliber of weapons was far smaller than usual and could have been the aircrew themselves. They are still at large, but we are still searching.”

“And we had this truck destroyed along the roadway between the air base and Trier. Far to close in proximity to the communications site for my tastes. We found evidence of both insurgent weapons and FNC standard calibers being used at that location. While airdrops from the FNC are not uncommon and sometimes have 5.56mm weapons and ammunition, the insurgents around this area typically use our weapons against us.”

“And finally we have the rumors and reports of pending large scale attacks against the base here and the one in Bitburg. My counterpart also hears of possible strikes against Hahn and Buchel by other insurgent cells. While they do harass our air bases from time to time, they often seek out other targets. To strike against our bases is a waste of resources as they well know and would rather spend their time attacking softer targets. But this time it seems like they are adamant about hitting our bases. All together I believe these are dangerous indicators of a pending attack against our communications site,” concluded the Major.

“An interesting proposition, Major, but these random events hardly point to your conclusions,” said the General. “How did you arrive at this?”

“Some things are possibly a stretch of the imagination, but I will tell you how I came to this. First off, how did the resistance know the area of the downed aircrew so suddenly? From what we know, the messages take up to two days to travel between cells. And even more with messages coming from England. But with a team from the FNC to give them almost real time intelligence, they would know far quicker than before. Then the vehicle ambush. While the FNC and the insurgents both use the calibers found, they never have in our area before. It could be a new cell operating, but I am not so sure about that. I would think the FNC would prefer to use their own weapons and have some of the insurgents as ground guides while performing a reconnaissance of the communication site. This team might have been coming back from the communications site when they stumbled upon the truck on the roadway.”

“Add in the burst transmission in our area which was more sophisticated than the communications we have seen so far. And finally, I have the radar tapes from the night of the airstrikes,” he said as he pulled an additional folder and small computer out of his bag. “An analyst discovered this while reviewing the tapes of the attacks and dogfights over our air bases.”

“Here we have the main concentration of fighters and bombers,” he said as he pointed at the screen. “These shots were taken before our radar was damaged by anti-radiation missiles. But right before the screen goes blank, we have another target here,” as he pointed to the northeast of the bases. “This target was lower and slower than the others in the picture. It could have been another bomber, but its course was not taking it anywhere close to the bases. We lost contact with it still on a heading away from the bases. This leads me to believe it was a transport of some kind and possibly dropped a special operations team somewhere to the south of here,” said the Major.

“And chance of this just being a routine supply drop for the resistance?” asked the General.

“Possibly, but why go to all the trouble to coordinate massive air strikes against our bases in the local area for a simple supply drop? They can and do drop things in here all the time without that kind of cover. But if I was planning the mission and was contemplating dropping in a team, I would coordinate it with air strikes in the area. It gets our attention away from the team being dropped and focused entirely on the fighters and bombers. At least this is the way I might plan it,” said the Major.

The General paused before asking any other questions. He looked at the maps and computer recordings of the radar tapes along with the neatly types summary of events. Supporting data was neatly tabbed in the folder, but he skipped over them for the moment. He would have time to read through it later and wanted the Major to be able to answer questions right now instead of later. “Are there any other possible explanations for this?”

“These things could very well be coincidence, but I do not believe in such things. The items that tipped me off the most were the roadside ambush and the communications transmission. Had the calibers been only the ones commonly used by the insurgents, we probably would have not given it another thought and written it down as an ambush performed by them. But this indicator led me to start looking for other evidence and I stumbled onto the burst transmission. I believe we are looking at an attack against the communications site or other critical area,” said the Major.

“But why the communications site?” asked the General.

“All indicators point to there. The ambush, the attack on the soldiers at the site itself, the seeming lack of activity at our other bases and outposts save what the resistance might be planning, the weapons used in the ambushes, the information on the bomber crew, it all points to an FNC team on the ground here as well as probable planning of an attack against the communications site. We know the cross Channel operations are almost fully ready and taking down our communications is critical to an attack of that magnitude,” said the Major.

The General paused once again and thought about the information. Typically if someone came up with such an outlandish tale, he would have laughed and dismissed the analysis altogether. But the Major was smart and analytical about his job. He had the unique way of looking at a problem from multiple angles at the same time and the evidence supported his claims. But the General was still cautious by nature. “Is there any chance this is a diversion to get our attention away from the bases or the aircrew and onto the communications site causing us to overreact in a different direction?”

“Possibly, but the communications center is the largest and most valuable target in the local area. I mean, we are just an air base here, not unlike the hundreds of airstrips we control across Europe. But the communications site? It is the primary for the communications going into and out of Northern France, Belgium and the Netherlands. In the event of an invasion, taking out our communications will be a top priority of the FNC and this could be an indicator of the invasion as well. If the site is destroyed, we might very well see the invasion coming soon thereafter,” said the Major.

“Your thoughts have merit, Major, but are you certain?” asked the General.

“The communications center is ripe for the picking so to speak. We have focused on keeping it low key, but we knew it would never be a secret forever. Eventually the resistance and in turn the FNC would pick up on it and attempt to destroy it. The FNC has bombed the transmitter sites repeatedly over the past few years, but never on the bunker itself. We believe they do not know the exact location of the bunker and were hitting the transmitter hoping to score a secondary hit on the bunker itself. But even so, we have never upped the guard force since it would easily be discovered by the insurgency and the position sent to the FNC air forces to bomb it until they destroyed it.”

“We built it far underground for that very same reason. We know the FNC has satellites that can see underground to an extent, but not as far as the bunker we think. We know the FNC will deliver enough bombs to completely remove that hilltop from the map to destroy that station if they knew where it was exactly. So we have hidden it well, but the rest of the security is still deficient in my opinion. We have upgraded it somewhat in recent months, but the alarm system is still waiting to be installed and work was to begin once the weather warms up. The profile of my analysis does not fit the established patterns of drawing our attention away from the bases or aircrews. It leads me to believe there is a possible strike against the site,” said the Major.

And once again the General thought about the situation and the Major. He had been right more than wrong, but he had been wrong before. He could overreact and take away security from one location and place it in another only to have the former be attacked and possibly destroyed. *But this is why I have advisors, to help me make decisions. To guide me into the path they feel is necessary,* thought the General and came to a decision in his mind. “I agree with your analysis of the situation, but this is a matter to be discussed at the next staff meeting. Do you feel it could wait until then or is it urgent enough to put out an alert right now?”

Now the Major was in a quandary. If he was right about the gut feeling he had, he would be hailed as a hero for identifying it in advance. If he was wrong, his enemies on the staff would use this against him and dismiss any other intelligence estimates he formed. Additionally, if he was wrong, he would needlessly tire the security troops assigned to guard the site on an unending alert schedule that would dull their senses. He chose the middle road being cautious, but at the same time, being proactive in the security arrangements.

“Sir, if I was the leader of this strike team, I would take the time to evaluate the reconnaissance by my team before committing. I could conceivably guess the attack on the truck as well as the four security troops at the site was done by a small reconnaissance force that had been watching. I would further wait for the insurgents to get in position to attack our bases as a diversion before making my attack. I believe we have enough time in either case to wait for the staff meeting tomorrow before committing to a course of action regarding this. I will have my staff look for further indicators of an impending attack against the site and look for anything else out of the ordinary. But I would also like your permission to reinforce the guard force at the communications site just in case. Not an alert, but more manpower than usual,” said the Major. “After the staff meeting, we can come up with more definitive plans and possibly even other explanations for the events happening recently.”

“Well planned, Major. You have my permission to stage an additional platoon at the site prior to the staff meeting. Can they accommodate another forty personnel?” asked the General.

“I believe so sir. Part of our deception was a seemingly lack of security at the site, but accommodations were built for a reinforced company of troops. Currently I believe they only a platoon with a heavy weapons squad. If they cannot accommodate the reinforcements, arrangements can be made,” said the Major.

“Make it so. Have a platoon detached from the Trier garrison and under the command of the local officer in charge. Prepare the full brief for the staff meeting and be prepared to argue your case, Major. And one final thing...I would not worry much about your opposition on my staff. You are far smarter than most of them which leads to jealousy. Continue doing the job you are doing and you will go far,” said the General as he dismissed the Major.

He saluted smartly and departed the office to the command post. He left the message to be transmitted to the Trier garrison to detach a platoon and signed the order block. He knew the orders came from the General, but didn’t put that in the remarks section. He also left orders with the command post to let the Operations Officer know of the decision to reinforce the security at

the communications site. Feeling everything he could do was done he returned to the intelligence vault and started working on his briefing for the staff meeting.

But what he didn't know was the garrison didn't plan on sending someone right away. Had the General's signature been on the orders block, it would have been far more immediate. But a Major? They would take approximately thirty six hours to process this request as was usually the case. No sense getting in a hurry over a simple intelligence Major who was scared of the shadows.

Date/Time: 18 March/1855

Location: German Resistance Bunker, Near Speicher, Occupied Germany

The team had finished packing up everything they would need and prepared to move. Partners helped each other sling the heavy packs overloaded with ammunition, explosives, food and water. While they planned on being able to dive towards the designated landing zone, they also made plans to move on foot if necessary. Weapons were loaded, checked, rechecked and additional equipment was added on prior to movement. Magazines were readied and gunners made sure their spare belts of ammunition were ready to be fed into the machine guns. Again, partners checked partners and ensured everything was in order. The Germans were also loading themselves down with additional equipment to be passed off to the Americans before they began their assault on the bunker itself.

Rick and his team had already headed out in advance almost two hours prior and had indicated the route to be clear of IU personnel. They had a good head start on the team and were making good time even with heavy packs. The remainder of the team was in the bunker getting ready to move in the next ten minutes and were performing last minute checks.

"Heavy?" asked Thomas as he checked over Amber's pack.

"Yeah, a little, but only for a short distance," said Amber as she swayed her hips to settle the pack. It made no noise as she did so and settled right at the top of her web gear.

"I can take some of that if you want," he offered.

"Nah, it's all good. Besides you are older than I am," she grinned.

"Still young enough to whoop your behind. And I don't have my pack on. I'll just push you over and laugh as you turtle," he laughed referring to a soldier overburdened by a heavy pack that couldn't roll over easily and looked like a turtle struggling on the top of its shell.

"Bring it on old man!" she shot back with a laugh. "I've got quick release buckles, remember? And then you're in big trouble."

“I’ll prove you wrong once we get back to England,” said Thomas with a grin as he picked up his own pack with a grunt. He was marginally successful and almost fell over backwards before catching his balance.

“Who’s the turtle now?” she laughed and grabbed at the pack to lift it up so he could get the straps tightened up.

Final checks were done and the teams prepared to depart the location. Michael’s team would be in the lead along with two Germans for their almost direct line approach to the area picked on the map for their patrol base. It was dark outside and the teams flipped their night vision devices down and turned them on as they departed the bunker. The remaining resistance had already cleared the local area of all IU patrols and had hit a lone truck near Oberkail to divert the attention away from Speicher and the southern part of the base. The thirty personnel walked quickly in two files away from the area as the door was sealed back up behind them.

They quickly passed southern parts of the town of Speicher and entered the woods where they felt more comfortable. Still, they moved silently but with a purpose through the heavy woods and hit plenty of spider webs as they walked along. The security halts they took were no more than five minutes as they had a serious timeline to keep and wanted to arrive at the patrol base before dawn. Rick called in every half an hour and pronounced the route clear and had already made it to the L46 roadway at the crossroads of the L43 roadway. The patrol base was easily within another hour or so of their march and Rick would make the determination on whether to stay or shift sites to a better location.

Thomas’ communicator buzzed at him and he retrieved it while they were stopped. He had the device set on night vision compatible and saw the message from their headquarters. Entering the encryption code, he saw the text message appear in his goggles.

*MESSAGE FROM ERIS PRIME 1403182004Z MESSAGE FOR ERIS RED FIVE ACTUAL
BREAK MISSION DETAILS RECEIVED AND APPROVED BREAK PICK UP PLANNED
FOR SAME LOCATION REFERENCE MISSION PLANNING NOTES BREAK ONE
AIRCRAFT ENROUTE TO PERFORM PICKUP INSTEAD OF TWO BREAK NO AIR
SUPPORT AVAILABLE AT TIME OF ASSAULT BREAK POSSIBLE FURTHER AIR
SUPPORT FOR EXTRACTION, BUT UNKNOWN AT TIME OF MESSAGE BREAK GOOD
HUNTING AND GOOD LUCK BREAK ERIS PRIME SENDS MESSAGE ENDS*

Thomas would send the message out to his team’s communicators once they got into position at the patrol base so they all could see the positive message from their support element in England. But until then, he passed on the message verbally to his team leaders letting them know the pickup location was still the same. They continued their file formation and their journey to the patrol base. Another hour and three security halts later, his communicator buzzed once again and he heard a voice through his earpiece.

“Warbucks, this is Badaa. In position and sweeping alternate base location. Primary base no good,” he said softly.

“Reference alternate location?” asked Thomas in reply.

The communicator buzzed once again and Thomas saw a ten digit grid reference appear from Rick’s device. He input the grid reference into the GPS portion of the device and saw the new location appear approximately five hundred meters southeast from the old location.

“Copy, heading for alternate,” stated Thomas. “Giggles, put the new destination into your device and alter course accordingly.”

“Copy, shifting destination,” said Nancy quietly and flagged down the German to her left. “We are moving to another location...we go someplace else,” she said while motioning with her hands.

“*Ja, Ich verstehen,*” said Hans Wolf as he followed the American on their new heading. Behind her, others were already putting the new data into their devices and saw the heading shift.

Date/Time: 19 March/0204

Location: Main Islamic Union Barracks, Trier, Occupied Germany

“Yes, Lieutenant, have your platoon in place no later than midnight tonight,” said the Captain, rather happy to have his worst platoon being sent off for some other mission.

“But sir! It will take us at least a day and a half to prepare to move all our equipment to that site,” complained the Lieutenant.

“Your equipment can be sent afterwards. The orders come from the area garrison commander and will be obeyed. By midnight tonight, you will be in place at the location specified in your orders,” said the Captain adamantly.

“Yes sir, how long will we be there?” asked the Lieutenant.

“Until you hear otherwise, any further questions?” said the Captain and meaning there had better not be any other questions.

The Lieutenant snapped up a salute and went back to his barracks room to continue sleeping until the morning. There was no rush as the location was only about forty-five minutes up the road from where they were at. Getting his troops together would be little trouble, but finding the supplies they were to take with them might be. He would put his platoon sergeant on it first thing in the morning.

Date/Time: 19 March/0311

Location: Patrol Base, Near Dierschied, Occupied Germany

“Halt! Advance one to be recognized,” said the voice very low and the order was repeated in German.

Nancy went forward, weapon at the ready to make contact with who she hoped were her own personnel. “Giggles, plus twenty-one, all secure.”

“Peanut,” came the challenge.

“Redwood,” said Nancy in reply.

“Welcome to our casa,” said Scott as the rest of the group closed up.

“What’s the deal? Why move the location?” asked Michael as he came into the encampment area.

“Had a trail running right through the primary. Didn’t look well used, but we didn’t want to take the chance,” said Scott.

“Wise choice,” said Michael, accounting for his team and pressing forward. Each team leader as well as Erik verified their personnel as they were admitted into the small perimeter. They had no tagalongs and everything was all secure. Packs were shed and personnel started to stretch after having the overweight packs on.

“We planned on expanding the perimeter once you got here to the west and south. That’s the best terrain to defend from,” said Rick.

“Yeah, put the folks out as you see fit. You are now designated camp commander,” said Thomas. He knew Rick had already gotten a good ground eye view of the area and knew exactly where the best places to put personnel would be. There would be fine tuning after the sun came up, but the small rise in the terrain gave them good defensive cover as well as thick undergrowth to alert them to anyone approaching.

Seeing everything was in order, Rick posted out a guard schedule and got the teams into the defensive positions he had already picked out. They were large enough to support the four man teams and were covered by at least two more. Everyone relaxed and waited to find out what the next move was.

“How far away until we start hitting the defensive screen of the site?” asked Thomas.

“About two and a half clicks,” said Darren.

“Okay, so about an hour of walking very sneaky like to the site, another half hour to an hour to move into position and say we are in place half hour before the anticipated arrival of the relief crew. So we move at 2000 tonight,” said Thomas. “Defensive arrangements and E and E point?”

“E and E to the southwest, then move to the northwest. Rally point east of Rodt,” said Rick. “Defensive arrangements are oriented to the northeast and east.”

“Everything is going to plan,” said Thomas as he nodded his approval.

“Get some sack time, you’re up next in the rotation,” said Rick. “I’ll let everyone else know what their shift is.”

Thomas nodded and went back to the pack where Amber was already curled up inside her poncho liner. Additionally, she had covered herself with some scattered branches to better camouflage herself. Slight movement was heard around the patrol base as the personnel were in a one up, three down rotation with one full team awake at any point in time. Greg had already volunteered to stay away for his team and would be replaced by Brian. Thomas pulled his own poncho liner out and curled up next to Amber, making use of her cover for himself and using his patrol pack as a pillow. He was asleep within minutes of his head hitting the cold nylon of the pack.

Date/Time: 19 March/2158

Location: ORP near the IU Communications Bunker, Near Dierschied, Occupied Germany

“Everyone knows where they are going?” whispered Thomas as they all gathered in the ORP except the Germans out on security.

Nods followed the question and he could see the grim look of determination on everyone’s faces. The march in had been easy as there were no patrols out and about in this area. The team had quietly formed an ORP approximately three hundred meters away from the LP/OP designated as OP 4. They all knew their missions, they all knew their roles and each and every knew what the chances of success were.

“Twenty-three hundred on the dot take down the targets. Let’s do this,” whispered Thomas as the group started picking up patrol packs with the necessary explosives and incendiaries for destroying the communications bunker. The single members and pairs quietly slipped away, looking for the world like dark ghosts moving through the forest and not making any noise. The past few days replayed in Thomas’ head at the speed of light as the current time seemed to slow to a crawl. He worried about the mission, as he always did, and tried to play out each and every scenario in his head and what to do “if.” But, even as he did so, he knew they had a good plan and stood to reason they would achieve success.

He moved himself along with his team to get into a position to engage the bus as it came to a stop in front of the bunker. A bored IU fire team started out on its routine patrol around the perimeter, not knowing the highly trained troopers were waiting just mere meters away from them. The entrance itself looked deserted and well covered from aerial view. *And if it was easy*

to find, I wouldn't be out here getting ready to kick in the door myself, thought Thomas as he heard a twig snap from the patrol entering the tree line.

The seconds ticked away and he started receiving indicators the remainder of his team was getting into position to engage the defenders of the site. Most were in place at 2220 ahead of schedule, and Thomas relaxed somewhat. The only thing that mattered now was if the patrols kept up their routine times. Everything was going according to plan and according to schedule...

Date/Time: 19 March/2228

Location: Main Islamic Union Barracks, Trier, Occupied Germany

“Is everyone ready?” asked the Lieutenant to his Platoon Sergeant.

“Yes sir, everyone is on board the trucks or in the personnel carrier,” said the Platoon Sergeant.

“We shouldn't keep anyone waiting. Do the drivers know the route?” asked the Lieutenant.

“Yes, they have been briefed. We are ready to go on your orders,” said the Platoon Sergeant patiently.

“Let us go find out why we are departing in the middle of the night to unknown spots, Sergeant,” said the Lieutenant as he climbed into the lead vehicle. The convoy started moving slowly through the garrison and came to a brief halt at the gate until their orders were verified. Once they were cleared, the gates were opened and the drop arms lifted. The vehicles continued up the roads to their eventual destination of the communications bunker.

Date/Time: 19 March/2259

Location: IU Communications Bunker, Near Dierscheid, Occupied Germany

Weapons were readied and pointed at the targets moving into view. The suppressors were already fitted to the various rifles, carbines and pistols and prepared for action. While they wouldn't be noiseless, they would be muffled enough to mask the obvious noise of gunfire. Each person picked their primary targets and then their secondary targets for those with the roving patrols. They got lucky this time as only one team had four personnel patrolling the exterior. Just as planned, they tromped through their assigned patrol routes all while fighting the cold wind coming through the trees. They looked like ordinary bored rear echelon troops who didn't expect resistance. But little did they know death awaited them in the trees.

The guards must have alerted the guard force to the approaching bus as the door was heard opening to the bunker. A single man came up the steps from the door and waited for the group to appear.

“Initiate,” said Thomas over the radio without announcing his call sign. He didn’t announce his call sign over the radio as it was unnecessary. Everyone knew each other’s voices by now just by the sound of them. He could hear several muffled shots, but only because he was listening for them. Otherwise, the quiet German night was still undisturbed.

“Door posts down,” said Darren after he and Frank had quietly fired on the two and taken them out. His team moved towards the door to cover it while waiting for the bus.

“Rover one down, moving to front” said Rob Davis, paired up with his sister.

“Rover two down, moving,” radioed Scott, paired up with Rick.

“Observation one down,” radioed Brian.

“Observation two down, enroute” radioed Nate Clark.

“Observation three down, moving” radioed Willy Perez.

“Observation four down, moving” radioed Michael.

“Observation Five down, enroute” radioed Nancy.

“All friends; get to the door. Relief crew is almost up the road,” stated Erik over his radio.

A bus engine was heard climbing the hill heading towards the communications site. The personnel quickly made their way to the ambush site where they would hopefully catch the relief crew off guard. The bus was seen coming up the road slowly and bouncing around on the potholes which marred the roadway. The headlights were seen fairly clearly in the woods as it approached and would have destroyed the night vision of the waiting predators had they not shielded their eyes. The bus came to a stop near the entrance and the teams were preparing to fire. The members on the bus wondered why their relief was not outside as was usually the case and sent one of the guards to investigate.

Weapons were readied and aimed at the personnel preparing to exit. Just as the first security personnel exited the vehicle, Thomas started the ambush by firing at him first, effectively blocking the bus entrance.

Gunfire erupted along the entire front catching the bus and the personnel in a perfect L shaped ambush. It was one thing to be able to duck for cover out in the open, but the thin walls of the vehicle provided no protection from the various rifle and machine gun rounds being aimed at it. It was like the proverbial fish in a barrel. The entire relief crew of twenty nine personnel was trapped without any place to go. The fire continued to rake the vehicle as gunners started reloading and aiming at targets which came into their view. The rear emergency exit came open and one of the IU troops tried to escape, but was hit immediately and went down hard. A grenade was tossed into each end of the bus as planned and exploded, causing more carnage inside the death trap.

Since time was now of the essence, Darren and his team rushed the doorway to the center. Darren saw a man attempting to close the door without using the hydraulic system. A quick triple tap ended any sort of actions he planned as Darren, Frank, Jeremy and Martin took up positions and watched into the darkened corridor. The control panel for the door was found and quickly disabled. An individual was seen peeking around the wall and Frank took a quick shot at him, earning a hit in the process.

During this whole time, Rick and his team swept the bus and ended any further resistance from the occupants. All were wounded to some extent and many were already dead. Rick saw Erik starting to put his own people into position around the entrance and at the emergency exit to cover it lest the skilled communications technicians escape through the emergency hatch. Seconds counted now and Rick joined the remainder of the team at the entrance and started preparing themselves for the assault. Magazines were quickly replaced and pistols drawn for those carrying the large machine guns. Teams were oriented towards the entrance and Darren received his go call from the rear man.

Erik and his resistance members were converging on their designated points and starting to get into position, gathering ammunition from the dead soldiers and preparing for any follow on forces. Two personnel went to the top of the bunker and found the PKM machine still in working order. Nancy's shots had been true and into both heads of the machine gun crew. They oriented it towards the roadway which led to the site and where reaction forces would probably come from.

Seeing everything was still going to plan, Darren oriented his weapon to the front and started down the fatal funnel of the staircase with the other fifteen members in tow behind him.

CHAPTER 16 – UNINVITED GUESTS

Date/Time: 19 March/2304

Location: IU Communications Bunker, Near Dierscheid, Occupied Germany

“Flashbang!” yelled Darren as he came to the L in the passageway continuing into the communications complex. He dropped his carbine at his side and pulled one of the distraction devices from his web gear and pulled the pin. The remainder of the team stacked up behind him and prepared for the manmade thunder and lightning especially in a closed in environment. Pulling the pin, he waited two seconds before tossing the grenade around the corner and grabbing at his carbine.

But in such an enclosed space, the results still stunned the team for a microsecond. However, they were prepared and trained for it to go off as it did. All had closed their eyes and tried to cover their ears, but it wasn’t a simple task while holding a weapon at the same time. The lighting was still on inside the bunker negating the need for night vision and he quickly flipped his head mounted harness upwards. Rounding the corner, Darren snapped over to combat mode and his training took over while flash thoughts filled his head. As he scanned forward, the thoughts became a pattern. He wasn’t really thinking the thoughts as it was pure instinct from countless hours of training, but if one could see his brain waves it might look something like this...

Individual... hands filled with rifle... target... aim... fire... scan... target... individual with pistol... aim... fire... scan... two individuals... no weapons... uniformed... aim... fire... aim... fire... scan... corridor... door closed... scan... individual... weapon... aim... fire...

He came to a stop at the doorway and the remainder of the team stacked up behind him. “Reloading,” he announced to the members behind him and Frank immediately took his place watching forward. Inside the communications center, there were no friendlies, no hostages and no worries about collateral damage. It made their job simpler.

After getting a new magazine put into his weapon and putting the old one in his dump pouch, he checked the door as Frank scanned down the hallway ahead of him. It was locked and they didn’t have the time or the desire to rig an explosive charge. Darren crossed over the doorway and prepared to kick in the door. Frank continued his watch down the hallway, making several shots in the process. Jeremy moved up and prepared a grenade to be tossed inside the room. Once everything was in place, Jeremy pulled the pin on the grenade and Darren kicked at the door. It came open as Jeremy let the pin fly and the grenade cook off for three seconds before tossing it inside. Gunfire erupted from the interior smacking the walls and ricocheting around. It didn’t hit anyone, but served as a reminder they were uninvited guests in the command center.

The grenade exploded and the group heard screaming from inside. Darren and Frank led the entry inside with one going left and the other right just as they had practiced countless times before. After button hooking into the doorway, Darren saw a wounded figure on the ground

attempting to pick his rifle back up. Two head shots ended his futile attempt to do so. He heard Frank making another two shots on two other individuals before announcing it was clear. Darren repeated the “clear” call and announced they were getting ready to exit the room. The hammering of Jeremy’s light machine gun was heard prior to their exit.

“Hallway clear!” announced Jeremy.

“Exiting,” said Darren as they stepped out and continued moving down the hallway to the next door. They stood by and let the second team move around them to provide better cover in the hallway. Again, the interior was repeated and another grenade thrown in. They had reached the end of the hallway where the path diverged into two separate corridors. The IU soldiers in the communications center were attempting to create a defensive stand at the end. Michael took the time to look around the corner using a small mirror and was shot at for his troubles. But before the gunfire caused him to pull back, he could see several troops in both ends of the hallway preparing to meet the intruders.

“Thumper,” he announced from behind him to the waiting teams. Nate and Amber moved forward to the two side of the hallway, just out of sight of the IU defenders and loaded up their grenade launchers with high explosive projectiles. Newer designs, they had their arming distance set lower than the typical grenades of the past. While they wouldn’t need to aim, they knew they needed to keep the launchers somewhat elevated since they didn’t want the grenades exploding right outside their position. Additionally, Willy and Thomas grabbed smoke canisters from their gear and prepared to throw them as well for concealment of the grenadiers while they were shooting. The smoke grenades were smaller than their conventional brothers and made specifically for indoor fighting. The spoons popped off and the two tossed them around the doorway, earning more shots in the process.

“Those idiots have created a crossfire with each other, you know?” asked Thomas as the grenadiers waited for a few seconds for the smoke to rise.

“Better for us I think,” said Michael.

“Snoopy, you and Badaa go left. Token and I will go right. Standby,” ordered Thomas as they planned for this eventuality. They could split into teams of four if the situation warranted, but they didn’t like doing that.

The smoke now covered the corridor from both sides enough to conceal the actions of Amber and Nate. They held their weapons around the corner enough to fire the launchers and return quickly to reload. The process was repeated once again and all four grenades went off as planned. Just to be sure, the two sent a flash bang type grenade around the corner just to be certain. The teams were stacked up by then and rounded the corners just after the grenades went off...

“Get that gasoline over to the escape hatch!” ordered Erik as the Germans were digging in on the exterior. While they didn’t expect major trouble, they knew they needed to hold off the reaction forces long enough for the Americans to do their job inside. One of the old handheld radios squawked to life.

“Vehicles approaching from the roadway!” said Albert Kruger.

“Engage them as far away as possible!” ordered Erik into the radio. “You, you and you! Go back up the observation post!”

The three Germans quickly left the area, one of which was armed with an old RPG. They quickly ran down the road to the observation post and got ready to engage the threats as they came up the forest road. The lead vehicle was a jeep type and was followed by an IU copy of the old Soviet BRDM type armored car. Albert picked up the old launcher, checked his back blast area and sent one of the improved rounds to the lead vehicle just as it poked its nose around the bend in the road. The warhead hit directly in the side of the vehicle and ripped into the thin skin before sending the remaining explosion into the occupants. The launcher was quickly reloaded as the remaining Germans started engaging the trucks barely seen through the trees.

Albert had reloaded the launcher by then and aimed at the armored car following the convoy, the next direct threat. The round was fired and hit the vehicle at an angle and the round glanced off before hitting the trees and exploding. Cursing loudly, he called for another round and was handed one before reloading to engage again. He saw the turret starting to roll over and engage with the 14.5mm machine gun and knew time was of the essence. He aimed and fired the launcher once again, hitting right below the turret and popping it off before the vehicle started to burn.

“What is going on!” demanded the platoon sergeant as he saw the two lead vehicles get hit by anti-tank fire. “Do those idiots not know we are reinforcing them?!”

Still in a quandary, he got on the radio to prepare a report to the higher headquarters as rounds snapped through his convoy. The soldiers with him had no idea what was going on and hadn’t been given the order to return fire yet. But they managed to escape prior to being hit and sought cover in the nearby woods. But behind them, four Germans had silently crept up and engaged them from the rear. Another firefight ensued at the convoy location as another RPG was fired at the trail vehicle, effectively blocking in the entire convoy.

The platoon sergeant got out the list of frequencies he was supposed to use and informed the base at Spangdahlem of the current situation. He didn’t have the proper frequencies for the guards at the communications bunker and would have to be relayed through the local base to tell them to cease fire.

“Sir! Message from the communications center! They are under attack!” yelled one of the command post operators as he received the message from the scared controller at the site.

“What’s going on?!” demanded the Major in charge of the night shift.

“They say they are under attack by ground forces that have penetrated the perimeter! Unknown numbers, but the guard force on the outside isn’t answering!” said the controller as he half listened to the continued report from the bunker and informed his officer in charge at the same time.

“Send out a general alert!” ordered the Major as he picked up a headset to listen to the reports coming in from the bunker site.

“Is it time yet?” asked the German partisan from Cochem. Although not assigned to this area, he was brought in because he had a special talent.

“Almost, I would have thought you more patient than this,” replied the other German as he looked into the binoculars at the main gate of Spangdahlem.

“I am patient, but I do not like being this far from home. Why did they need me instead of that one man from here, what is his name?” asked the first man.

“Peters I think. Alexander Peters maybe?” said the second. “Two more minutes.”

“I wonder what they have planned?” asked the first.

“I only know of what happens after we set this off. We are the ones starting everything,” said the second.

The first picked up his rifle, a captured IU SVD type, and started sighting in at the gate. “Looks like we may be in luck. I believe there is an officer visiting the gate.”

“Oh?” asked the second.

“Yes, he is strutting around like a peacock and I believe I can see some gold braid on his shoulder,” said the first.

“One minute,” said the second.

“I do hate this rifle,” said the first.

“Maybe after the Americans come, they will give you something better,” said the second.

The first man, a former Bundeswehr sniper, dialed in the range and checked the winds. The rifle was notoriously inaccurate for his intended purposes and he missed his G22 he had used while still in the service. He hated being this close to the gate, but knew he had to get closer in order to make his shots count. But he was talented and knew he could make the shots at five hundred meters fairly safely. He would take the officer first, then the machine gunner near the gate. After that, he would pick targets at random until they needed to slink away quietly and head back home.

“You may fire when ready,” said the second as he saw his watch had hit the mark.

The sniper took in a breath and let one round fly. His judgment of the winds and range were dead on as he saw the round strike the officer in the chest and he went down. Not wanting to waste time, he ranged out the machine gunner before they had an opportunity to bracket the area where the shot had come from. The second round flew to its mark as well and the machine gunner went down behind the sandbags and didn’t move. By now the gate guards were alert and looking out and he decided to wait for a moment for his next target. He doubted they know exactly where the two were at and would give them no reason to look in their general direction by taking another shot.

Soft “whumps” were heard in the distance as mortars started firing on the base. The two knew the rounds would probably not be very effective as the IU were dug in pretty well, but it would keep their heads down for a few moments. Hopefully long enough to get the next phase of the attack underway. And they had a large surprise in store for the IU forces on Spangdahlem.

And around the region, attacks came without warning. The traffic control station on the A60 and A1 Autobahn exchange was hit by a car bomb prior to the forces being engaged by effective small arms fire.

The air base at Bitburg was hit with mortar fire and a breach in the perimeter forced the defenders to deal with determined resistance forces as they set explosives on anything they could find. The time delayed fuses caused major destruction and a line of burning buildings, destroyed equipment and dead IU soldiers indicated the path they took through the base before slinking back into the nearby forest.

Car bombs went off at the garrisons in Trier, Daun, Wittlich, Prüm and Landscheid. Further small arms attacks were seen against the other outposts.

A supply convoy just leaving the logistics base at Gerolstein was hit just after leaving the town limits. An ammunition convoy, the resistance had planned the ambush down to the second and trapped the convoy inside a designated kill zone and liberally raked it with machine gun fire before rushing in to save what equipment and ammunition they could.

The small airfield at Föhren had the runway cratered and the helicopters engaged by heavy machine gun fire which disabled the critical systems before they could be used as a counter attack force. The Hind model gunships were typically armored, but the resistance used its sole recoilless rifle to engage them from a standoff distance and hit each and every one before the crews could man them. They continued to attack the defenses from long range and take out many of the talented pilots and ground crews which serviced the helicopters.

Spangdahlem was hit fairly hard as the base defenders rushed to the main gate to attempt to defend it from being breached by the resistance. But their playbook had been studied and the resistance bands from Binsfeld, Speicher and some from Wittlich came through the back door and set charges on the underground fuel storage on the east side of base. While it wasn't easy to get to, enough of the pipes were available to set the cratering charges and blow into the tanks. After leaving, the charges exploded with one getting a lucky hit down into the underground tank. The sky lit up like daytime as the burning fuel consumed everything on the heavy aircraft ramp and spread to the nearby buildings. The resistance continued firing on anyone who wasn't them on their way back out the perimeter fence and escaped into the dense woods to the east of base.

Across the Eifel Region, bands of resistance came out of the woodwork to strike back in one massed attack. IU troops in the open were engaged and screamed for help from the other posts. But help wasn't available as each and every outpost had their hands full with the determined resistance. Before this attack, they had not seen such determination or a wide scale coordinated effort by the resistance. In short, the system was quickly bogged down and nobody could help anyone else. The garrisons and outposts had to fight with what they had for the moment and were powerless to send help to the communications center.

"I think we found the quarters of the guard force," said Michael as he looked over the wounded Nate Clark.

"It's just a scratch," said Nate as he held the bandage against his arm. While more than a scratch, he could and would continue on mission before admitting to the injury.

More fire came from the inside of the room splattering the walls to the outside. Mostly it went off in the other direction down the hallway, but some managed to hit near the teams.

"What now?" asked Thomas.

“I peeked inside before they blasted my mirror. Saw at least a half a dozen, maybe eight. Rifles and one machine gun,” said Michael.

“Grenades and a claymore, now,” said Thomas as grenades were handed up from the other members and prepared for throwing. The ancient M18A1 Claymore mine was still the most effective controlled detonation mine the FNC used and it was to be used once again. A radio detonator was plugged into the detonator well and readied for use. Once everything was in place, the grenade pins were pulled and tossed into the room. Shouts in Arabic were heard from the inside as the grenades went off and drowned out any further conversation. Michael slid the mine across the floor into the middle of the room during the confusion and before the soldiers inside could react. Just as they were getting over the shock of the four grenades being tossed inside, the C-4 explosive was triggered by radio and the seven hundred steel projectiles bounced around the room and shredded everything in their path.

Thomas and his team had stacked up on the outside and were prepared to move. He led the entry into the larger room, this time with four people as opposed to two. As he traveled down the left wall, he saw and target and engaged...

“Looks to be the main communications center. One of two rifles, mainly pistols, but not many of those,” said Darren as he pulled back the small mirror and prepared for the assault.

“Grenades?” asked Jeremy.

“Too much computer equipment to soak up the fragments. We’ll have to dig them out the hard way,” said Darren, although not liking that answer.

“Pass up your flashbangs,” said Jeremy to the individuals behind him.

Frank continued watching down the hallway and taking shots at the random IU soldiers who would appear in his line of sight. While only flash targets, he did make hits at least half the time. Darren prepared the grenades to be thrown into the room as Rick and his team prepared for the assault inside. He tossed in four at regular intervals, waiting for the previous one to go off and then waiting four seconds before tossing the next one in. He wanted the defenders inside the room to be as disoriented as he could before the main team went inside. After the fourth one was thrown inside, Rick prepared to move by the doorway and felt a squeeze on his shoulder telling him the team was stacked up behind him.

As the fourth grenade detonated, he slipped inside the room and started to engage the targets as they appeared in his sights. They were trapped without any place to go and completely oblivious to the team as they entered. Shots rang out as the team engaged the skilled technicians who could operate the equipment inside.

On the surface, the resistance was having their own troubles with the determined follow on platoon of soldiers from Trier. While getting into the bunker was easy, they had no idea of the additional platoon coming up from Trier as dispatched by the Intelligence Major. While covering the entrance was fairly easy, the problem was the fact of getting surrounded. But they were putting up a determined fight. Eventually the IU had figured out something was terribly wrong at the bunker and it had been taken over by hostile forces. The platoon sergeant was busy directing the soldiers around the defenses and trying to best pin them down for piecemeal destruction. But the Germans were having none of that.

“Another squad heading around to the east!” announced Jonas Richter.

“Keep their heads down!” yelled Hans Wolf as he scanned his front and saw a pair of IU infantry darting across an open area. He fire a quick burst and hit one of the two after leading them enough.

“Armored vehicle coming around through the trees!” yelled Michael Lange as he engaged with his PKM machine gun. He did little more than annoy the BTR-80 type vehicle, but at least it felt like he was doing something. Albert Kruger came to his side and aimed an old RPG-7V launcher, still the workhorse of the IU nations. Simple and reliable, it worked as planned with the updated warhead as Kruger fired and hit the vehicle right in the center. It slowed to a stop and fire was seen coming from the firing ports on the side and smoke billowed from the hole created by the anti-tank warhead. IU soldiers were seen spilling out the back and were engaged by the both of them. They managed to hit about half of their number before the remainder was hidden by the woods nearby.

“How long on the Americans?” asked Marcus Schneider after shooting a burst from his machine gun at a team of IU troops hiding in some long grass.

“I do not know!” answered Erik, hoping the radio on his web gear would come to life announcing they had completed their job at the site.

In the woods, Alexander saw the small command group and the platoon sergeant speaking into the radio. He aimed his SVD rifle at the Sergeant and started taking into account the winds, elevation and ranges...

“We have to have help here!” demanded the Sergeant into the radio. “These defenders are dug in like lions protecting their dens!”

“We have no help to give you! There are widespread attacks across the region and everyone is fighting for their lives! You will make do with what you have and capture that objective! As soon as forces become available, we will send you relief forces,” said the Colonel forcefully into the radio net from Trier. Another mortar round hit nearby and jarred the building he was in.

“I only have a platoon, maybe two squads left! I have to have more forces if I am to defeat these insurgents!” demanded the Sergeant. He cared little about being insubordinate at that point; he was only concerned with living through the current fight.

“Keep them pinned down and we will send help when we can,” said the Colonel.

“Get third squad into a position at the top of that hill and put some fire on that machine gun! It’s murdering us and must be taken out of action! After that, tell them to fire on the defenders from behind and keep them pinned down. Tell what’s left of second squad to remain in position and keep the insurgents occupied and their attention away from their rear. First squad will make a flanking attack to the west side and start rolling up that defensive line,” ordered the Sergeant to the other members of the small command group.

Just as he finished giving out the orders, he head snapped to the side and the remainder of the sergeants saw him fall over dead. Alexander’s rifle bullet struck true and killed the only remaining member of the IU force which could effectively plan a counter attack against the resistance and the FNC team. But the squad leaders had their orders and were prepared to carry them out.

Alexander had watched for further activity and made another shot at one of the squad leaders before moving back to the lines and preparing for the eventual assault.

“Found the escape hatch,” said Frank as they had finished up in the command center and the two other rooms in the hallway. Nothing was left alive in the hallway to resist.

He pointed to a small doorway leading to a ladder. The ladder went upwards about fifty feet to a hatch, presumably which led to the surface.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to pop that hatch. Erik’s guys are likely to shoot first and identify later,” said Rick.

“Agreed,” said Darren. “Your team starts laying the explosives in the comm room and place a large charge against the roof at the end of this hallway. I’ll head back and try to get Warbucks on the radio and see if he needs help. Set the timers at twenty minutes, but don’t pull the pins yet.”

“Got it,” said Rick as his team started pulling out the various high explosive and incendiary charges to destroy the equipment lest it be used again by another crew.

“Warbucks, this is Snoopy, status?” asked Darren as he reached the T junction in the hallway.

“Snoopy, this is Token, we are mopping up one last room. Two more minutes and we will be clear,” said Michael in reply.

“Need assistance?” asked Darren.

“Negative, we’ve got this. Try to contact Erik on the surface and check on his status,” said Michael.

“Got it,” said Darren as he returned down the hallway and saw Rick hard at work setting the charges. “Guys, drop your packs and let Badaa have some more fun.”

The team dropped off the packs of explosives and continued towards the ladder to the surface. Darren figured he could get to the top and see if there would be better reception to contact Erik. He looked at the foreboding ladder and began his climb.

“We have to displace!” yelled Christian Schmidt. “We have a squad about to overrun us!”

“Pull back to the entrance!” ordered Erik over the radio.

As Christian and the other man rose up and prepared to run, gunfire erupted to their front. Christian was able to dive behind a tree, but the other man was hit fatally in the chest. He rushed away from the portal leading down into the bunker and to the relative safety of the remaining defenders.

“What is this?” asked an IU Private as they saw the manhole cover at the portal.

“Probably an emergency hatch of some sort to the bunker. Leave it alone. We have the machine gun to deal with,” said the Corporal in charge of the fire team.

They continued on as bullets snapped through the woods around them. But the fire was mainly covering fire and was not aimed at them. It was meant to keep their heads down more than anything, but was ineffective in that job. Eventually they came to a slight clearing and could see the PKM machine gun on top of the bunker hammering away at the remaining squads to their front. They were in a perfect position to ambush the machine gun from the rear and cease the fire which was destroying any chance of taking the bunker back.

“RPGs and machine gun!” ordered the squad leader as they took up a skirmish line facing the main bunker. Three individuals came forward, the machine gun crew and the grenadier. “Take out that nest, now!”

The machine gun crew checked the range and started firing short bursts at the target until it was dialed in perfectly. The Germans manning the machine gun had no idea of the threat to their rear and were unable to take cover before they were hit. The grenadier fired one HEAT round at the nest and was rewarded with a hit inside. The machine gun position ceased to be an effective part of the defense as the remaining squad took the rest of the Germans under fire. They were being fired at from both sides and started getting the feeling all was lost.

“Erik, this is Snoopy, do you read?” asked Darren after changing the channels to the frequency used by the Germans.

“Snoopy! We are caught in a crossfire! We need help!” screamed Erik as rounds continued to hit the defensive cover from both sides.

“Where are you at?” asked Darren.

“We are at the entrance and trapped,” said Erik as he fired at a target running through the trees.

“Is the hatch still secure?” asked Darren.

“My people have pulled back away from it. They were about to be overrun,” said Erik.

Darren was faced with a quandary. He knew he could pop open the hatch and check around the area for the IU soldiers. But he also knew by doing so, he would make his entire team sitting ducks as they waited on the ladder below him. But either way, they needed an alternate exit since the primary was covered from two locations.

“Now or never,” he said, mainly to himself as he unlocked the pin holding the wheel in place. It took a bit of effort as the wheel hadn’t been used in some time, but eventually he broke it free and it started to turn. He finally got it to the stops and the spring loaded hatch came open easy enough. He used his mirror to look around the area and couldn’t see anyone nearby. He even

checked to the rear of the hatch by angling the mirror just so. Seeing it was safe, he poked his head up and waited for the inevitable shot.

After five seconds, there was no gunfire and he scampered up the remainder of the ladder and hopped over the side. He took up a position to sweep in the entire area before declaring it to be clear and calling up the remainder of his team. Firing was heard about a hundred meters to their left, but it wasn't aimed in their direction. His team got onto the surface and flipped their night vision back on and prepared to move.

"Team to the north," said Jeremy quietly after taking up his position.

"They have Erik and his boys in a crossfire," said Frank. "We'll be sneaky like and catch them from behind."

"Sounds like a plan. Spread out in a skirmish line and press forward. Watch for friendlies and when we get the IU forces in sight, stop and prepare to ambush them," said Darren as they started forward. Martin kept a watch to their rear and his front as they started through the vegetation towards the gunfire.

After seventy meters, Jeremy saw the machine gun still firing at the German defenders at the entrance. He took a knee and alerted the rest of his team to the main offensive weapon of the IU squad. "M-G team to my front, thirty meters."

"Three riflemen to my front, forty meters," said Frank.

"Looks to be a squad leader and RTO to my front, thirty meters," said Jeremy.

"Single rifleman to my front, maybe another, thirty-five meters," said Darren. "Hit them hard and fast from behind. Use suppressed fire."

The team made sure the suppressors were ready on their various weapons and aimed as the IU soldiers had no idea of the danger that lurked to their rear. As he were bloodthirsty at the thought of being able to kill the insurgents to their front, the inexperienced squad leader had neglected to put out rear security. This fatal mistake would be the undoing of the entire counterattack of the IU forces.

"Sir, I need a moment of your time," stated the Pacifica Captain in charge of the German Branch of the General Staff Intelligence Division.

"Yes, come in," said the Colonel in charge of the night watch in the massive intelligence center. A former British Officer, he had recently come back into the military after being vetted by the FNC Staff. He ran the intelligence center very effectively and efficiently.

“Sir, we have reports coming in from across Germany, France, Luxemburg and the Low Countries about major resistance activities. So far we have at least twenty major attacks and we stopped counting the minor attacks. Somehow, something massively coordinated is taking place on the continent,” said the Captain.

“Show me,” ordered the Colonel as they departed the office into the buzzing center. The Prism 3-D screen changed and pulled back to show the map of the continent. Red dots indicated the attacks the intelligence forces knew about and the larger the dot, the larger the attack. “What happened?”

“Sir, this kicked off at around the same time as Operation Eris Red Five, Eris Blue Twelve, Eris Orange Three and several other special operations were supposed to get underway. It started in the same areas and seemed to spread out from there,” said the Captain.

“Major targets?” asked the Colonel.

“There doesn’t seem to be any kind of pattern emerging but rather just hitting what they can when they can. French, German, Belgian, Dutch and even the Danish resistance have all hit targets of opportunity. We are still receiving reports from our contacts, but it seems like there is a major uprising and it’s spreading further east and west,” said the Captain.

The Colonel stopped to look at the map. “Can we exploit anything?” he asked.

“Sir, I don’t know yet for certain. But this will help in the Phoenix plans by disrupting lines of communication, destroying infrastructure, decreasing morale and probably hurting their overall manpower numbers. The IU will probably start looking inward trying to catch the bands of resistance instead of focusing on the beach defenses,” said the Captain.

“Which works in our favor,” said the Colonel.

“Quite possibly so,” said the Captain.

“Get a summary and likely course of action on their part completed as fast as possible and recall the off duty staff to assist. This information needs to be in the hands of the General Staff this morning and courtesy copy the Operations Division,” ordered the Colonel.

The Colonel watched the buzz around him as the various intelligence staff got to work either identifying additional attacks, starting their own estimates, verifying damage or recalling the off duty members. They had no indication this would happen in advance and were quite surprised at the ferocity of some of the attacks so far. It appeared Frankfurt, Metz, Cologne, Luxemburg City and Liège were especially hit hard. At least this is what the signals intelligence, underground communications and overhead imagery told them. But reports were coming in from Paris, Hannover, Amsterdam, Brussels, Munich and as far east as Berlin of larger attacks by the resistance. Maybe they were not connected, but they probably were somehow. He picked up the

phone to call the General in charge of the Division to let her know what was happening and the steps they had taken so far.

The reports continued to flow in while he did so and he could see additional red spots appearing on the map.

“Erik, the squad to your rear has been taken care of. What else do you need?” asked Darren after they finished off the rest of the ten man squad silently. Only the last two had any idea of the team to their rear and had only turned in enough time to face death as it came in the form of lead and copper.

“We are still facing at least a squad and a half to our front. If you can get to the flank, you might be able to work up that side,” said Erik as Darren heard firing in the background.

“Roger that, we’ll get another team from below. Can you hold out that long?” asked Darren.

“Yes we can, but I fear the IU has put out the alert to the local garrisons and our time will be short,” said Erik as he paused and fired another round at an advancing IU soldier. He missed, but the soldier ceased his advance. He hid behind a tree, but not from Alexander who sent another round into the head of the soldier.

“Give us five minutes,” said Darren as he and Frank dashed back to the portal. He hoped the radio would penetrate into the lower level with the portal being opened. “Warbucks, this is Snoopy.”

“Go ahead,” said Thomas to the weak transmission.

“Erik needs some help up top. Can we spare another team to mop up the survivors?” asked Darren.

“What survivors?” asked Thomas as he peered into a conduit of cables.

“Apparently a reinforcement unit joined the party and they are having a tough time dealing with them,” said Darren.

“Okay, we’ll send another team,” said Thomas. “This looks like the main line trunk. Make it a priority. Even if we can’t break all their toys, we’ll make it harder for them to reestablish communications.”

“Got it, you want to have my team head up top?” asked Michael.

“Nah, you’ve got a wounded man. And besides, the boss doesn’t get to play that often,” chuckled Thomas.

“Okay, we’ll continue setting the charges,” said Michael as he observed the trunk and decided on the best spot to put one of the blocks of explosives. Thomas grabbed his team and went towards the shaft to the surface. After coming to the stop, he remembered something that would help out.

“Those jerry cans still up top?” he asked Darren up the shaft.

“Yeah, three of them,” said Darren and knew why he was asking.

“Badaa, send Trouble and Rocky up to grab those gas cans. Put them in spots where they can do the most damage,” said Thomas as he slung his carbine and prepared to climb to the surface. His team followed him up and they hopped out of the small circular tunnel and prepared to move.

“We’ve got Solo and Irish holding down this end of the line. From what we can tell, they’re in a line to the southeast and firing at the Germans. If we go about two hundred meters this way, we’ll be on their left flank and can start rolling them up,” said Darren.

“Sounds good, you take the lead,” said Thomas as his team spread out in their own formation and bounded forward to the start point. They found Jeremy and Martin waiting for them and prepared to move. They moved quickly through the woods to the assumed left flank of the enemy. They could see random flashes of gunfire through the trees and the occasional bullet whizzed above them in the trees. Once they were close to what they thought was the point, Darren used hand and arm signals to call a halt and prepare the group to form a bounding overwatch. They moved ahead by pairs, but the entire group seemed to move forward in a constant fluid motion. As one pair would drop, another would rise and continue forward. While they were good on the inside, they positively excelled in the woodland environment. It was something they had practiced for many years starting in Colorado, honing in Texas and the Eastern Seaboard and perfecting in countless hours of training in between.

As they came upon the single and pairs of IU soldiers, the lead pair would fire and take them out of the fight. They were in no mood for prisoners and fired fatal shots each time. Eventually they were detected, but by that time, the IU was down to barely a squad of infantry left to oppose them. While they could have surrendered, there was no leadership left to signal such an offer. The highest ranking member was now a Corporal and he was hit before long by a well aimed rifle shot from Erik. The machine guns operated by the resistance kept the individuals pinned down until the Americans came into view and then shifted their fire away to the next target.

The two teams moved forward until they reached the limits of the IU line. But they continued well past the final member just in case there were others out hiding in the dense woods. Not finding anything, they called out to the German defenders before emerging from the woods themselves.

“American team coming out!” announced Thomas before they left the wood line. Amber announced the same phrase in German so everyone would understand. As they walked out,

weapons were still at the ready and they startled a few of the German defenders. Erik started taking account of his people and seeing who survived.

“Everything okay?” asked Thomas.

“I believe we have lost four. Considering the odds against us, I have to say that is not a bad thing,” said Erik. “How long on your team and the explosives?”

“I don’t know. They were in the process of getting everything together when we came up,” said Thomas. “If you don’t mind, we’ll head down and check on them and hurry things up.”

“We will sweep the woods and check on the IU soldiers. Do you need any of the ammunition?” asked Erik.

“No, it’s all yours,” said Darren as they turned to go into the bunker once again. By the time they entered, they found Rick and Michael had just about set everything up.

“We’ve got the gas cans in the communications center and with the reserve magazine. One more can in the wiring trunk just in case. Also, we found the fuel tank for the generators. Baldy thinks he can find the emergency drain valve. We can turn that on and flood the place prior to the explosives going off,” said Michael.

“Fill the place up like a big fuel air explosive?” asked Darren.

“Not really. It’s diesel and not so explosive, but it will burn like there’s no tomorrow especially if we leave the doors open,” said Nate, joining the group.

“How’s the arm?” asked Greg.

“Hurts, but I can still fight,” said Nate as he left to continue showing others where to place the explosives.

“What about the charge against the ceiling?” asked Thomas.

“We’re not sure if we have enough to bring the roof down. Problem is, this place is probably four or five feet of reinforced concrete. Maybe a few inches of steel plating as well. That won’t be easy to penetrate and bring down,” said Rick.

“So forget about it. Focus on wiring up the equipment and other stuff,” said Darren.

“We’re going to have some left over, so we might as well give it a try. But if we flood the area with gas, do we want to try doing it?” asked Rick.

“Nah, just wire up what you need to and go from there. I like the fire idea better,” said Thomas.

“It’ll take us another ten minutes to finish everything up. We can start gathering everyone on the surface and start thinking about getting out of here,” said Rick.

“What about the trucks in that convoy?” asked Darren. “You think we could use those in our evasion?”

“Maybe, at the very least grab the main gear from our patrol base and bring it here. That’ll save some time,” said Amber.

“Use one of the light trucks and go get it, I like that idea,” said Frank.

“Okay, get a team together and head to the convoy. Pick out a truck that will work and go get our stuff. Make it quick though,” said Thomas.

“There are plenty of back roads we could take which would get us closer to the L46 roadway,” suggested Erik after dispatching four people to search the woods.

“I don’t want to travel the main routes though. Once we get there, we go on foot,” said Thomas.

“It should not be a problem. They are probably still trying to react to the other attacks,” said Erik.

“Maybe, but at the same time, I don’t want to risk getting stopped on the roadway,” said Thomas.

“I understand,” said Erik as he joined the group in the bunker. A shot was heard in the woods nearby. “My people are not taking prisoners.”

“You should save your ammo,” suggested Brian.

“We are taking plenty from the Muslims,” said Erik nonchalantly.

The group finished wiring the explosives and gathering the intelligence materials they could find. While they couldn’t carry everything, they did grab what they could and stuffed it into the patrol packs. Plenty of computer disks, papers and other electronic media were found and taken with them. What couldn’t be carried would be burned with one of the incendiary bombs. At the very least they would deny its use to any IU soldier who came along after them.

“Ready to start boss,” said Rick as he came out and wiped his hands.

“Start the timers and turn on the gas,” said Thomas.

The fuel valve was released and the diesel in the tank started gushing out. Rick ran quickly away from the room and left the door open so the flooding would continue in the hallway. There were no drain holes in the hallway to stop it and the only one in the maintenance room had been

plugged by a towel. The rest of the explosives received their commands via the communicator device and started their countdown.

They all rallied up on the surface and waited for Frank, Darren, Heather and Rob to return. They came bouncing up in a truck which looked remarkably like an old CUCV with all the packs inside. Frank and Heather were nowhere to be seen.

“Good to go and there is another truck down there we can use. Between the two of them, we can get everyone away from here,” said Darren as he exited the bed of the vehicle.

“Where’s Demo and Trouble?” asked Thomas.

“Getting the other truck out of the line and ready to go,” said Darren.

“Let’s get cracking,” said Thomas as he led the way down the road to the other truck. Frank and Heather had already finished getting the truck turned around and out of the line of vehicles. The diesel engine was already warmed up and the truck ready to go. Heather jumped into the driver’s seat and prepared the vehicle to move as her brother moved into the passenger seat beside her.

The packs were quickly thrown into the other vehicles as time was slipping away rapidly. While the complex was underground, they had no great desire to be anywhere near it when it went up in flames. But prior to starting, the Germans came up carrying their dead and requesting to make room in the truck. The Americans obliged and moved their items so the bodies could be laid flat in the bed of the larger truck before moving.

They drove down the winding dirt road before moving off onto an old logging path which took them in the general direction of the L46 roadway. It wasn’t fast moving as several branches covered the roadway, but the truck managed to bash through the majority of it with little problems before continuing on the journey. They had just reached a ridge close to the roadway when a large explosion was heard behind them. The trucks stopped and looked the mile to their rear and saw a large fireball rising into the sky followed by smoke illuminated by the ground fire. Even at this distance, the fireball was impressive and the group stopped to watch their handiwork for a moment before continuing on. Thomas sent out his “mission successful” message over the communicator after seeing the explosion and linking up with the satellite. An immediate response was received in less than twenty seconds and also the fact the rescue was still on for when they requested it.

“Well, the hard part’s over now,” said Darren as he turned back and the truck got underway again.

“Not really. That was easy, getting out is going to be the hard part,” said Thomas as he continued to look at the flames to their rear until the ridge blocked his view.

CHAPTER 17 – JOURNEY

Date/Time: 20 March/0035

Location: Near Zemmer, Occupied Germany

“Leave the truck here,” said Darren as he pulled his ruck out and got ready to move. It was far lighter than when they started since they had used every bit of explosive they brought with them.

“My people will drive it on ahead to Zemmer. I want my dead to have a proper burial,” said Erik.

“Yes, of course,” said Darren. “The rest of us can hump it in.”

“And we will go with you until you get to Zemmer,” said Erik as he detailed Michael Lange and Jonas Richter to drive the truck into Zemmer and pass on the bodies of their comrades to those they could trust.

“How far away is the road?” asked Rick.

“About three hundred meters. I believe the traffic is not going to be out with all the attacks going on,” said Erik.

“But just in case, let’s get a move on,” said Michael as he prepared to leave. Rucks were thrown on and adjusted once again and the group began to file into formation for the short walk to Zemmer.

“Where are the trucks waiting for us?” asked Thomas.

“On the north side of town near a farm. They are hidden in a barn nearby,” said Alexander as he helped adjust the pack of Nancy.

“You doing okay Giggles?” asked Thomas.

“As good as can be expected. Maybe not as glamorous as Glamour puts it, but I’ll be okay,” she said with a neutral expression.

“Let us know if you need anything,” he said as he pulled on a strap on his left side.

“How about to wake up in my bed in Colorado and none of this ever happened?” she said under her breath. But he heard what she said and almost remarked on the comment before being interrupted by Michael.

“Ready to go boss,” he said as he moved to the front.

“Volunteering to take lead?” asked Thomas.

“Of course. We haven’t had that opportunity very often since you and Snoopy hog all the glory,” he grinned.

“Let’s get going. Alexander, you going to be in the lead as well?” asked Thomas.

“Yes, but along with Markus,” he said as he pulled on his small pack.

“Let’s get to it then. Team leads, count your chicks,” said Thomas as they prepared to move. He was looked over by Amber and pronounced good. He did the same and adjusted her patrol pack slightly and tugged at a loose strap. Brian informed him he was ready and each team leader in turn told him their status. They moved out once again in a modified file formation and started towards the roadway. They reached it before long and scrolled the road as was the custom and continued moving on the other side. Sirens could be faintly heard from the base and there was no traffic on the roadway. The horizon still glowed with the fire from the communications bunker as well as the fires from Spangdahlem, Bitburg and Trier. It reminded Thomas slightly of the videos from before the Fall of the cities burning during the mass riots. Several news agencies had run the pictures from traffic cams on the outside of the cities and the unearthly glow created by the mass fires started. The situation now was eerily reminiscent of those times.

But the North American nations had dug out of the ashes and begun anew. Some had taken longer than others, but they all were still on the path to recovery. Banditry was still commonplace in certain areas, but for the most part, the citizen militias and National Guard forces took care of that problem. Hopefully with the coming invasion, Europe would be free once again to rise out of the ashes as it had before after the two World Wars that devastated the continent. *I guess the third time’s a charm*, thought Thomas as they continued their silent walk to the farmhouse and the waiting transport. When they got there, he would send the message off with an ETA and schedule out as much as he could in advance before departing in the trucks dedicated for their use.

They came into a large open field and the formation slowly opened up wider as members separated themselves as they always did. Never too close together to get them both with the same burst; but not too far apart they couldn’t support each other. Alexander slowly shifted the direction of the group slightly to a more northern heading and the patrol followed suit in the darkness. They were making good time towards the farmhouse indicated on the map and should make it within the hour if they were lucky.

Another explosion was seen from the base. The fuel dump that had been hit had spread to some of the alert munitions and was currently cooking them off as they got hot enough. The base would be out of commission for several weeks at least due to the resistance activity.

“Nice job your guys did out there,” whispered Thomas as he pulled alongside Erik.

“That was the remainder of my group and several other bands. We have waited for this opportunity for a long time,” said Erik quietly.

“Tell them they did good and thanks,” said Thomas as he pulled back once again.

“Bring up the real-time satellite imagery of the operations area of Eris Red Five,” said the Colonel in the Intelligence Division Headquarters.

“Standby, coverage is limited to Pacifica KH-16 and U.S. KH-17...bringing feed online,” said the operator as he figured out which satellite to use for the briefing. The Pacifica satellite offered a better angle, but the U.S. satellite offered a better resolution. He decided on the U.S. satellite.

The coverage was grim from orbit and the lighting in the local area was prohibiting them from getting a good look yet. “Panning, town of Badem...town of Pickleissem...town of...major activity at Spangdahlem Air Base.”

“Hold and enhance,” ordered the General as she looked over the feed. “Give me a thermal and infrared spread on this.”

The thermal showed a large blur where the cargo aircraft ramp should have been along with major glows in the munitions storage area and the surrounding buildings. The infrared wasn’t much better. The General figured she couldn’t see what she needed to in the enhanced photo and went with a radar image instead. “Looks like they took out the underground fuel storage.”

“And we are still registering explosions,” said the Colonel as he pointed at the explosion seen from orbit.

“Bring up real time video feed,” she said and the image changed once again to the nighttime look at the base. Smoke was blowing away from the base, but major fires were seen and vehicles dashed this way and that on the base. A small firefight was seen by one of the gates. They would wait for daytime to see the extent of the damage.

“Continue to communications bunker,” ordered the General.

“Yes ma’am...panning...town of Herforst...town of Heidweiler...communications bunker imagery established,” said the operator.

“Bring up enhanced radar with night vision overlay,” she ordered, trying to make sense of the images seen.

“Looks like a pretty good fire still going there,” observed the Colonel.

“We thought the place had an underground fuel storage and generator. They probably hit that when they destroyed the rest of the equipment,” she said. “Bring up thermal.”

The image was replaced by the thermal and the picture obscured. The largest warm areas were coming from the entrance and the emergency hatch not seen until then. "Composite image of all."

The photo changed once again as the electro-optical image, thermal, infrared, night vision, radar, penetrating radar and laser enhancements were put together and the computer figured out what to do with it. The screen normalized and even the flames were seen in the computer generated image.

"I think we can count this as a successful mission, ma'am," said the Colonel.

"Not yet. Pan the surrounding areas, let's see if they are still about," she ordered.

The scope of the picture changed and the image was pulled back to look at the local area. They used the thermal cameras to detect different signatures and then movement within the area within a five kilometer radius. But nothing was seen and the operator moved the scope out to ten kilometers.

"We have something here by Zemmer...stand by...disregard, that's cows...another here...stand by, enhancing image," said the operator as he say a slight blur and the movement of a group of people. "I count twenty total bodies traveling in a northward direction."

"Eris Red Five was only supposed to have sixteen people," said the Colonel.

"But they were working with the resistance. And that could account for the additional four bodies," said the General.

"Good point. Looks like they are heading to this house up here," he observed and pointed at the map of the farmhouse within a kilometer and a half. "Do a radar and penetrating image of the house and barn."

The image changed once again and the outline of the house and barn appeared on the screen. It changed momentarily as the penetrating radar kicked in and showed the interior as well. The distinct outline of the two trucks could be seen clearly in the picture. "What's that all about?"

"Looks like they arranged themselves some transportation. We knew the German Resistance was going to get them to the pickup zone, but we never knew how," she said. "I want a complete package done up and sent to them. Everything you can including imagery and analysis. Send it to the leader and the deputy."

"Yes ma'am," said the Major who had been called in to deal with the current happenings in Europe.

“Let’s check out the Frankfurt Airport before moving on to Eris Orange Three’s target,” she said as the screen changed to the general overlay of Europe. “And we need up to date info on what targets have been hit in West Europe, especially those in and around Normandy.”

“Token, want to take your team and check out the barn?” asked Thomas.

“Yeah, we’ll drop our packs and be on our way,” said Michael as his team got ready to move out.

“Hold on, Kodak, mind taking Baldy’s spot?” asked Thomas.

“Yeah for sure,” said Scott.

“I can hack it,” said Nate as he prepared to drop his pack.

“Yeah right. You’ve been carrying your rifle with one hand almost the entire way. You don’t have to put the rest of us at risk by not being up to speed,” said Scott.

“I’m fine, I can do it!” said Nate adamantly.

“Listen, right now, could you drag Guns with one hand and fire with the other?” asked Scott reasonably.

“Absolutely,” said Nate.

“Okay, hold my pack for a moment while I get it put back on,” said Scott and intentionally gave it to Nate to hold in his wounded arm. He gasped and dropped the pack as the pain swept down his arm. “You will stick around here and I will take your place.”

“Sorry, I just didn’t want anyone to think I was slacking,” said Nate.

“Yeah, you do it so often,” said Scott with a chuckle.

“Everyone ready?” asked Thomas as the team prepared to depart.

“Yeah, we’re taking Alexander and Markus with us,” said Michael as they prepared to depart. The remainder of the group would overwatch them from three hundred meters away. Close enough to provide covering fire, but far enough away to maintain enough distance to escape easily. Michael led the way as the six went across the cow fields and over the half wood and half wire fence. They made good time and the image was very clear in their night vision due to the glow on the horizon from the air bases nearby.

Once they reached the exterior, Alexander leaned over to Michael. “I will make the approach.”

“We go together,” said Michael.

“As you wish,” said Alexander as he held his SVD in tight and dashed the short distance to the door. The remainder of the team watched the barn and held weapons ready just in case they were double crossed. They weren’t expecting it, but you always expected the unexpected.

“Fazil?” whispered Alexander into the door when they approached.

“Alexander?” came the whispered reply.

“Ja,” said Alexander and the door creaked slightly. A large shotgun was seen poking out from the door and Michael reacted on instinct. However, before he had a chance to do anything else, the barrel of his carbine was grabbed by Alexander. “They are our contacts!”

“Sorry, I just reacted,” said Michael.

“And you would be any different to someone knocking on your door in the middle of the night?” laughed Alexander. “Radio your team and let them know to come up.”

“Once we’ve gotten inside and checked things out,” said Michael.

“If you insist,” said Alexander as he disappeared into the doorway. Michael was more or less forced to follow him inside and check things out for himself. Once inside, he saw the man with the shotgun now pointing it at the ceiling and another nearby holding an AK. “Meet Fazil and Nadir. Two legal Turkish immigrants from way before the Fall.”

Michael was a bit standoffish at the two, but common courtesy took over and he went over and shook the hands of the two men. They both wore the part of your typical Middle Eastern man, dark skinned and dark eyes. But they didn’t seem to hold anything back and shook the hand of the American without any reservations.

“What’s the deal?” asked Michael.

Alexander spoke in German quickly to the older of the two and received a reply. They spoke for a couple of moments before Nadir began a long conversation. Occasionally Alexander would ask a question and receive a reply. Once he was finished, he passed on the new information to Michael.

“It seems there has been a bee’s nest kicked over around here. All the IU forces have collapsed onto the air bases as planned and are trying to fight the fires and damage done there. Spangdahlem was especially hard hit and the outposts trying to get on were engaged at the gates. It seems like we have made the IU far more afraid of us in two hours than in the past two years,” said Alexander.

“And the patrols?” asked Michael.

Alexander asked the question and received a reply. “Not since before midnight. The last patrol they saw was heading at top speed toward the base.”

“Nothing in the local area?” asked Michael.

“No, it is clear,” said Alexander.

“Okay, we’ll get the rest of the team up here,” said Michael as he got on his communicator.

“Warbucks, this is Token, we are all secure up here. Bring the rest of the team up. Kodak, bring up the team.”

“Warbucks copies.”

“Kodak copies.”

The rest of the teams started in towards the barn as Michael took a quick look around. Nothing was out of the ordinary except for the two IU trucks sitting side by side with canvas covers over the cargo area. They would work just fine for transporting the teams to the landing zone. Which was still under debate and Michael decided to hold off on that question until the rest of the team came up and got settled in.

“It is my fault sir,” said the intelligence Major. “I accept full responsibility for not seeing the trends in the data we received.”

“You could not have foreseen the large scale attacks we received tonight. Had you come to me with information stating the attacks would be this bad, I would have dismissed it out of hand,” said the General.

“But we saw the indicators,” said the Major.

“It is not just here, Major. The insurgents are attacking all over Europe with a ferocity we did not expect. It seems we have not dug them out as we once thought,” said the General. “But what have we lost?”

“You know our situation here and in Bitburg. However, the outposts and small garrisons have been hit especially hard. The station in Badem is a total loss and was burned to the ground. The survivors have regrouped here. We are still trying to get control of our men to keep them from firing at anything that moves. The A1 traffic control station is completely destroyed as well. Trier is still fighting an urban battle with the insurgents in that location and is taking serious losses.”

“The airfields at Hahn, Geilenkirchen and Büchel have been rendered ineffective. Your helicopter assets near Trier have been damaged and cannot be made available for several days. Most of our posts and garrisons have received attacks of some sort over the past six hours. Reports are coming in from as far east as Berlin and as far west as France of wide scale insurgent attacks. However, these reports are not confirmed as of yet since communications are still down,” said the Major.

“And the communications center?” asked the General.

“A complete loss sir along with the additional security platoon I dispatched. We heard reports of them being under attack and suddenly they went off the air. The relief force was in contact with unknown hostiles until they too stopped communicating. We have yet to send out a patrol to check on the status since most are bogged down in trying to save this base. I have recommended at least a reinforced company be dispatched to secure that site,” said the Major.

“As soon as the assets become available, make it so,” said the General.

“I would like to personally lead them and see for myself what can be salvaged,” requested the Major.

“I need you here, putting together the pieces of what happened. I will have to answer some tough questions when the time comes,” said the General.

“In order to answer your questions, I have to see some things for myself sir,” said the Major.

The General knew there were other reasons for this, but went along with the plan anyway. If there was any chance of catching the FNC team while still on the ground, he needed the man most familiar with the situation. And none of his current commanders knew the whole story and the big picture. The Major would be the smart move to send out looking for the team and attempting to destroy them before they slinked away from Germany. “I will have a rifle company assigned to you for the duration of your investigation.”

“Thank you sir,” said the Major. “If there is nothing else, I will take my leave.”

“Go with God,” said the General as he turned to his operations staff and continued to issue orders. “We need to start getting the traffic control set back up on the Autobahns and other major roadways. These insurgents are probably still out there lurking and we might find some using the roads. At first light, we will reestablish the major control points along with the local patrols.”

“We cannot move until first light. If we were to leave out now, there is a good chance of us being stopped by IU forces, but also of us being attacked by our own people,” said Erik after translating from Fazil.

“How do your people know not to hit these trucks in particular?” asked Thomas.

“We use a simple method of identifying the vehicles. The transportation placard is positioned in a certain way and the resistance knows these vehicles work for us. They will not strike at them,” said Erik.

“How long?” asked Michael.

“Move at seven o’clock. Dawn is around 6:30 or so and that gives us the extra half an hour to get ready,” said Alexander.

“And how do we go about it?” asked Rick.

“Easily, hide in plain sight. The trucks typically carry supplies and things to other bases. Fazil and Nadir already have the forged paperwork for the movement to Malmedy in Belgium and shouldn’t be challenged at any checkpoints. They told me there have never been searched in the past and often give bribes to the checkpoint guards. It will be no different now,” said Erik.

“And we know this will work?” asked Brian.

“It should. It has always worked in the past,” said Erik.

“Okay, it’s around three right now. Everyone up at zero-six for muster and we roll out at seven going with your plan,” said Thomas. “Any dissenters?”

“No, sounds like a good plan,” said Darren.

“Can’t think of anything to add,” said Michael.

“What happens if we get stopped short?” asked Scott.

“We go on foot from wherever we get stopped at, play sneaky and make it to the landing zone. I’m getting ready to coordinate the pickup point,” said Thomas.

“Long walk,” observed Heather.

“We’ve done that distance before. We might not like it, but consider the alternative,” said Martin.

“Snoopy, Badaa, come up with alternate plans and catch an hour of sleep if you can,” ordered Thomas. “Token, get some ideas about pickup sites closer than the planned zone. The rest of you catch some sleep. We might need it.”

The group went about their duties as Thomas worked with Erik and Alexander about the sites he was thinking of for being picked up. His communicator buzzed softly in his pocket and he removed it to put in the encryption code. The incoming packet was fairly large and took some time to download from the satellite. Thomas set it to the side to continue its work while he planned out the coming transport and watched as Rick and Darren were arguing some minor point or other with occasional injects and compromises from Scott to satisfy them both. The communicator buzzed once again and Thomas opened the packet.

It was a full intelligence briefing on the strikes on the bases as well as current trends and activity in the local area. Opening the maps, he found the high resolution composite imagery of the bases at Spangdahlem and Bitburg with the destruction heaped on them by the resistance. It would be a minor breach of security, but he showed the pictures to Alexander and Erik. “Looks like your boys did some good work.”

“This was taken when?” asked Alexander.

Thomas looked at the display and the time/date stamp. “Looks to have been about an hour or so ago.”

“This is what we caused?” asked Erik.

“Yes,” said Thomas as he flipped through the pictures.

“This is the bunker?” asked Alexander as they came to a new set of photos.

“What’s left of it,” said Thomas, admiring the view from several hundred miles in space.

“Not bad for a bunch of pitchfork wielding farmers and dumb Americans is it?” laughed Alexander.

“We did good work,” observed Thomas. The report must have been sent out to the other members as he saw Darren and Michael looking over their communicators with small groups behind them. The rush of the mission was wearing off and slowly the individuals started breaking off and grabbing a small pile of hay to lay their heads on and catch a quick nap. They felt secure for the moment and knew they probably needed the sleep for the coming flight to England and safety.

“Major? I am Captain Jaber of A Company, 2nd Battalion, 341st Infantry Brigade. I was assigned to you for a mission,” said the Captain as he approached the Major from behind.

“Yes Captain. Were your orders clear?” asked the Major.

“No sir. I was only instructed to report to you,” said the Captain.

“We are going hunting, Captain,” said the Major as he looked over the reports one last time.

“Hunting for what, sir?” asked the Captain.

“A very dangerous prey,” observed the Major as he took several maps of the area with him and prepared to leave.

“Warbucks!” announced Willy as he went around the barn and woke everyone up. Thomas was dead asleep and showed no signs of coming to life anytime soon. Willy kicked at his boot once again trying to wake him.

“I’ve got this,” grumped Amber as she had been awoken by the efforts to rouse Thomas. She leaned over and whispered something in his ear. Her efforts were rewarded with his eyes popping right open with a bewildered look on his face. He sat up and looked at Amber strangely.

“What did you say to him?” asked Willy.

“My little secret. A girl has to have some tricks you know?” she laughed and wiped the sleep from her face. It was dirty from the remains of the camouflage paint, but her blue eyes were already alert. The remainder of the group was getting into their wake up mode and moving around, foraging in packs for breakfast or preparing their gear. Darren already had his small stove out and was heating water up for the meals they carried. Each team had one member getting out the stove of choice and doing the same for their team. Another two stoves were prepared for the Germans and Turks so they could do the same.

“How did you know to say that to me?” asked Thomas as he prepared his ration.

“Sharon told me before we left for Europe to get you going in the morning. She said you can get cranky and not want to get out of bed, but that phrase would get you moving right quick,” she laughed.

“You two talk about me much?” asked Thomas with a grin.

“Of course! She also told me I was allowed to give you the ‘eye’ when you were being dumb,” she laughed.

“I should be worried about now? What else did you two talk about?” laughed Thomas.

“Oh, just girl chat, you know?” she grinned.

“Yeah, I’m worried now,” laughed Thomas as he dumped the main meal pack into the water.

“She told me you needed a good woman around to keep you in line. And apparently she trusts me enough to have that dubious honor,” Amber grinned once again.

“Yeah, she and I are going to have a long talk next time we get home,” laughed Thomas. It seemed everyone was in high spirits after the successful mission. The only remaining element now was getting home. But while the group was in high spirits for the moment, they would get their game face back on when the mission got underway once again. The only one not smiling and joking was Nancy. Her mood still concerned Thomas, but so far she had done everything by the book and not let her emotions show. However, it was just not like Nancy in the current environment. Typically she would have been giggling and carrying on with the others, but her face was a mask of stone even as Michael laughed long and hard at something Willy had said.

But Thomas let it go and decided she was still getting her emotions sorted out. The mission might be good for her and help her put her loss behind her. It would take a long time, but this was decent therapy for the train of thoughts in her head. Everyone was eating quickly and changing out socks and undergarments for the trip. A little modesty was had by the group as they went behind a wall to change out their undergarments, but otherwise went down as far as they could without being improper. But even so, the members of the team ignored each other as they did so as it was normal for them to do so in front of the group. However, their hosts weren’t exactly accustomed to the display to their front and blushed up while the ladies removed clothing. But they didn’t avert their eyes.

“Feel like we are being watched?” said Heather softly to Nancy.

“Yeah, just a little,” she answered. “Maybe we should have thought of our guests before stripping down.”

Heather expected a slight laugh from Nancy, but her monotone voice and expression didn’t show any of the normal humor she exhibited. However, just because she could show off, Heather stretched out her arms over her head and gave a nice view of her six pack abs. Nancy just shook her head slightly and scoffed at the display instead of smiling like she once would have.

“I wonder how much the Americans want for the one with the brown hair?” asked Nadir to Alexander in German.

“Two chickens, a gallon of beer and a goat,” replied Amber in German as she pulled on a sock. “Yes, you should be careful. Some of us speak German around here.”

Nadir blushed up and looked at her. But he was quick on his feet and replied with a laugh. “I do not know if I can part with my goat.”

“Trust me, a goat might be less trouble,” laughed Amber.

“What are you two talking about?” asked Heather as she pulled on a t-shirt.

“Nadir wants to trade for you. I told him we would take two chickens, a gallon of good German beer and a goat. He says the goat is too much to trade,” laughed Amber.

“WHAT?! Only a gallon? You people are cheap!” exclaimed Heather.

The entire group laughed at the exchange and continued getting ready to move out. The packs were loaded into the vehicles and the routes checked. Thomas was preparing to send out the primary, alternate and tertiary landing zones picked out by the Darren and agreed on. Alexander and Fazil were quickly checking the routes and Michael was called over to assist.

“Do you still have those photos of the area?” asked Alexander.

“Yes, hold on,” said Michael as he pulled out his device and brought the pictures back up. “Any one in particular?”

“The one that leads through the town of Badem,” said Alexander.

Michael pulled up the photos and had to have Alexander help orient him to the location of the town. They found it and zoomed in at one particular area. “It appears the outpost was destroyed,” said Alexander.

“This burned out building here?” asked Michael.

“Yes, it was housing the local outpost that helped maintain traffic control for forces coming off the Autobahn,” said Alexander.

“Any reason they would put people back out quickly?” asked Michael.

“No, after large attacks they typically take up to a day before reestablishing the control points,” said Alexander.

“Why this route to the Autobahn anyway?” asked Rick.

“The other route takes us right by the air base. I do not believe you would like to travel that close. We might get shot at by the nervous security stationed there,” chuckled Alexander.

“No, I think the route you picked is good enough,” said Michael.

“And without the control point, it will be easier,” said Alexander.

“So we should be clear,” asked Rick as he joined the group.

“We should be. May I use your device?” asked Alexander.

“Are you familiar with it?” asked Michael.

“No, I was hoping to find the traffic control stations along the Autobahn,” said Alexander.

Michael showed him how to work the device and brought the pictures onto one large map of the area, all the way to their designated landing zone. Alexander took a minute to look through and scroll northward on the picture and checked along the known traffic control points.

“It appears to be clear up until the border crossing,” said Alexander.

“Which means we cross on foot?” asked Rick.

“Yes. We can get within I would say three or four kilometers of the border before we need to dismount and go on foot,” said Alexander.

“And we have coordinated this with the local resistance forces in that area?” asked Michael.

“More or less. They know we are to transit their area eventually, but do not know exactly when,” said Alexander.

“Snoopy is transmitting the data on the schedule. Do we need to amend it?” asked Rick.

“What time did you give them?” asked Alexander.

“Around 2200 local,” said Rick.

“We might be waiting for a while at the location, but I believe that will be more than sufficient,” said Alexander. An alarm in German was said from Nadir as he peeked out the door and weapons were quickly grabbed and readied for action. Thomas and Erik ran over to the door and peeked out the slits where the wood had grown apart over the years.

“It is Jonas, Michael and another member of my group,” said Erik as Thomas recognized them as well. They approached the barn cautiously until the door cracked open and they saw their friends inside. They quickly shuffled inside and took Erik off to the side and had a short conversation.

“They say the bodies of our dead are taken care of, all the traffic control points between here and the border are empty and the Prüm resistance is requesting to know the landing zone,” Erik said after translating the messages.

“Why do they want to know the landing zone?” asked Darren.

“He says they have the crew of the downed bomber you asked us to look for and wanted to arrange for them to go with you if it is possible,” said Erik after translating the question into German and receiving a reply.

“Any chance of them double crossing us?” asked Brian.

“No, I believe them to be honorable,” said Erik.

“Let them know the location,” said Thomas. “The crew is okay?”

“I would assume so. I do not know,” admitted Erik.

“We only have one aircraft coming for us. It might be a tight fit, but I’m sure we can throw a few pilots on top of our packs,” laughed Greg.

“Okay, we move out in fifteen. Let everyone know the standard convoy procedures are going to apply and to be ready just in case,” said Thomas. “I’d rather be way early than way late and miss the bus.”

“Got it,” said Darren as he went over to brief everyone.

“We are taking a big chance putting our lives into your hands,” said Thomas to Erik.

“As you have since the moment you set foot on German soil. We have not gotten you killed yet. Everything will be okay,” said Erik.

“Yes, you have kept us alive and we thank you for it,” said Thomas as he dug into his pack and retrieved an item to give to Erik. “But one more thing. We promised one of our contacts in England we would deliver a letter to his family. Can you ask your man to see it gets there?”

“Yes, of course,” said Erik as he took the letter and saw the address. He turned to the other German and briefed them on the location of the pickup and sent them to pass the message through the resistance channels to the Prüm resistance. He also handed over the letter and instructed the resistance member to deliver it personally to the address on the outside. The man nodded and went off on his mission to communicate covertly through the various channels the message would travel.

“Let’s get loaded,” said Thomas as he went over to collect his pack and throw it onto the truck. The teams split with Darren’s and Rick’s going in one and Thomas’ and Michael’s in the other. The Germans split up as well, eight strong now and climbed into the trucks with one taking their place in the cab along with the Turks. Erik was in the lead truck and Alexander in the second. But before loading in, they donned an IU uniform top and put on a standard field cap to better blend in with the IU trucks. Nadir and Fazil were rearranging the placards on the windshield and adding in the required signal letting the resistance know they were on their side.

Alexander popped out of the rear truck and opened the barn doors to allow the trucks to exit. The teams were now covertly inside and the back canvas covers were dropped and pulled to. While the inside was dark, there were still some holes where they could observe the outside. After the second truck exited, he ran to the door and hopped on the running board as it was still

moving. They had a fairly long journey ahead of them and hoped they would be in place by noon.

“Sir, the area has been swept. It is secure,” said the Captain to the Major.

“Have you accessed the bunker yet?” asked the Major.

“No sir. The fires are still burning inside,” said the Captain.

“Call for the fire fighters from the base and make sure they are escorted,” said the Major as they walked back towards the communications site. They had come to the destroyed convoy and stopped there while a platoon of infantry had swept ahead for insurgents waiting behind or any traps they might have left. The Major had picked up several pieces of brass at the convoy site and seen they were all of IU origin. But as they progressed closer to the site, he started finding small piles of standard FNC ammunition. It was fairly clear by this point who had hit the site. The 6.5mm Grendel casing was the extreme telltale of the team’s presence at the location as they were the only forces equipped with that particular caliber.

As they approached the entrance, the Major saw smoke still rising from the entrance to the bunker and dead IU soldiers all around. He would call in the mortuary affairs teams after they finished looking over the site and have them clean everything up.

“There seems to be no sign of who did this besides the assorted piles of brass. Normally, the insurgents leave signs telling us to leave or something of that nature,” observed the Captain.

“No, all the evidence is here. It was a special forces team from the FNC. See here? Here we have brass only their designated marksmen use. And here, the small piles means they are well trained in fire discipline. Our men are used to getting more ammunition when they ask for it so they shoot off ammo at increased rates. The same goes for the insurgents as they take the ammunition from our dead soldiers.”

“The soldiers that did this think of having to carry in everything and waste not a single shot. They are very careful in their placement and make sure every shot counts. Plus the professional way they destroyed this bunker means they knew exactly what to hit and how to keep us from going in quickly. The fire extinguisher system was destroyed and would the insurgents think to destroy something so trivial when there are computers and radios in plain sight? No, this is the work of professionals being guided by the local insurgents,” observed the Major.

“We are tracking an FNC special operations team?” asked the Captain.

“Yes, we believe so,” said the Major.

“How many of them do we believe there are?” asked the Captain, suddenly a bit worried.

“We are not sure, but I wouldn’t suppose more than fifteen or so. This handiwork is probably the work of less than twenty,” said the Major.

“They destroyed our most secure communications bunker with less than twenty men? How is that?” asked the Captain.

“Because they knew it was here. We deliberately kept the security of this location down so it would not be noticed. There was only a platoon of men on the ground here when they struck. It was only secure because nobody knew it was here,” said the Major.

“And my company was picked to go after them?” asked the Captain.

“Yes, your unit is the best infantry company in the division or so I was told. You trained your men hard from what I understand and they are good at their job. And now you will have the opportunity to practice your skills against the best the Americans can offer,” said the Major.

“I might request additional help. One of their special operations soldiers is the equal of three of mine. I have dealt with mainly illiterate conscripts from North Africa. Yes, they have trained hard, but they have never seen combat,” said the Captain.

“Remember, drills are bloodless battles and battles are bloody drills. Have faith in your men and the leadership that picked your unit,” said the Major.

“Understood sir, but I would like the opportunity to brief my soldiers and let them know who they are facing. It might help them in the fight,” said the Captain.

“I am not interested in how you run your unit, just what the outcome of the battle is,” said the Major with a wave of his hand.

“And when are we to leave?” asked the Captain.

“As soon as another unit comes in to take over security. One is being dispatched as we speak. We will wait at the base in Bitburg for someone to report this enemy unit in,” said the Major.

“And then?” asked the Captain.

“We will find them and destroy them,” said the Major.

“We have almost reached Badem,” said Erik through the back window of the truck to the teams.
“Once we clear there, we will be on the Autobahn.”

“And then?” asked Michael.

“Maybe forty-five minutes or so until we get to the area we need to dismount. Baden is just ahead and we need to act normally,” said Erik.

“What’s normal about riding around in the middle of Occupied Germany in the back of an IU truck?” murmured Willy Perez.

“Ain’t that the truth,” said Nate in reply.

“Wait, hold your fire,” said the Bitburg resistance member under his breath as he watched the approaching trucks.

“I have a clear shot and the mines are ready to explode,” said the machine gunner as he prepared to fire.

“The placard is in the spot for the underground. Wait one moment,” said the leader as he observed the truck.

“Twenty more seconds and they will be past the ambush zone,” said the machine gunner.

“Yes, I can see the mark on the placard. It is one of ours,” said the leader.

“So we wait?” asked the machine gunner.

“Yes, you will be able to kill the Muslims some other time,” said the leader as he watched the trucks approach and then leave the ambush site. He couldn’t see the inside of the trucks and wondered what they were carrying and why they were moving around while the resistance was still hitting targets of opportunity.

The trucks made the trip through town although they were glared at by several of the residents already out that morning. But there was a difference now. The Germans all knew of the strikes the night before and they had hope once again. They looked upwards at the trucks with hatred, but also of pride at knowing their own countrymen had struck hard at the enemy living amongst them. Alexander looked at the locals with pride in his own eyes and wished he might be able to open the window and cheer at the townspeople. But he knew that day was far in advance when they would be able to show their true faces after fighting for Germany.

A rock hit the side of the truck as they continued on their roll through town, thrown by an “innocent” bystander that wasn’t observed. A couple more hit the canvas areas of the truck as they continued before getting to the ramp for the Autobahn.

“Seems like someone is ticked at us,” observed Rob Davis.

“The town throw rocks at trucks,” said Michael Lange in halting English as he moved away from the canvas cover to avoid being hit by the rocks.

“And I thought we were a nice friendly IU convoy rolling through the German countryside,” laughed Scott.

The trucks slowed down to take the onramp of the Autobahn and slowly crept up as the two drivers shifted into lower gears to make it up the ramp without stalling. The trucks were well maintained and the engines had low hours on them as they came onto the high speed portion of the German highway system. However, they were alone as they picked up speed and headed westward towards their eventual destination. Nobody was asleep at that moment as they all were nervous about being out on the roadway and in plain sight. Plus, some pilot with an itchy trigger finger might think them to be an inviting target as they headed back to England after a bombing run.

“Yes, we need to move you,” said Ernst to the crew of the downed bomber.

“Why now?” asked the pilot.

“The less you know the better, but you are going home,” said Ernst.

The four looked at each other with large smiles on their face and immediately started gathering up the few items they had with them. “When do we leave?” asked the OSO.

“Immediately. We have arranged for you to be transported to the appropriate area,” said Ernst.

“How are we to be transported?” asked the co-pilot.

“In a truck with pigs,” said Ernst with a straight face.

“Umm, pigs?” asked the pilot.

“I am joking. We will take you in a truck transporting hay for the cattle near where we are taking you,” said Ernst with a laugh.

“I started to say,” said the DSO.

“Please gather your things. We need some time to conceal you in the vehicle,” said Ernst as the aircrew followed him out of the barn. They passed along their silver and gold chits in case the Germans needed them for bribe money.

The trucks were slowing on the Autobahn and Erik was heard banging on the window.

“Trouble! *Achtung!*”

“What’s going on?” asked Thomas.

“Apparently not all the roadblocks were taken out or they replaced them sooner than we expected!” exclaimed Erik as he watched another truck being searched ahead of them near the traffic control point. A full platoon of IU soldiers were manning the roadblock and they didn’t look like they were in a mood to argue. Erik saw a man get yanked out of the cab of his truck and slammed into the ground while the rest of the soldiers ruthlessly ripped at the wares inside. The trucks came to a halt about two hundred meters away from the checkpoint and sat in the roadway.

“Where are we at?” asked Michael.

“Near Steinmehlen!” replied Erik as if they knew exactly where that was.

“How far from the border?” asked Thomas.

“At least fifteen kilometers or more!” exclaimed Erik.

“We planned on a nice leisurely ten click walk boss,” said Michael.

“Yeah, I know...Snoopy, this is Warbucks,” said Thomas.

“I see it, problem ahead,” said Darren.

“Makes it about fifteen kilometers or more from the LZ, plus the fact we can’t exactly jump out and run into the woods,” said Thomas.

“Yeah, we might have to fight our way through this,” added Rick.

“Options?” asked Thomas to the group.

“None. They are not in the mood to be bribed,” said Erik, still watching the goings on to their front. The trucks hadn’t moved and an IU soldier was seen motioning them forward.

“Chances of blowing through?” asked Thomas.

“They are covered by a machine gun nest to the front and another beyond if they follow standard procedure. They will cut us to pieces if we try,” said Erik.

“We get as close as we can and open fire. Take out the first nest and deal with the second nest. But at least they won’t be expecting us to pop out right at the checkpoint,” suggested Jeremy.

“That doesn’t sound too bad. At least it gets us close enough to take out the first machine gun nest,” said Rick.

“And Trouble and I can work on the second,” said Rob.

“And the remainder of the troops on the ground we take,” said Thomas. “Any other ideas?”

“Can’t think of anything better,” said Darren.

“Nothing here,” said Michael.

“We have to do something quick,” said Erik as he watched the IU infantryman motion harder with his arm.

“Let’s do it. Start moving up. Snoopy, your truck goes right, mine goes left. Sweep through, take cover and set up to catch the other machine gun nest in a crossfire,” said Thomas.

The truck crept forward slowly and was quickly followed by the second. In the rear, the troops readied their weapons and raised the flaps on the truck. They would hop over the gate instead of lowering it and come around the trucks, firing as they went. The Germans would cover their movements from the interior while they all came out and then follow them to set up in position.

They were traveling about fifteen kilometers an hour and Thomas could see at least two squads of troops on the ground. The truck started slowing as it reached the drop arm across the road. He could hear Nadir yelling at the IU guard in Arabic and a shout in return. They pulled as far ahead as he dared before coming to a complete stop and the second truck stopping within five feet of the first. Both vehicles shut off their engines after being ordered to do so by the security working the checkpoint. The guard at the checkpoint walked towards the truck.

“Giggles, you got that gunner in the nest?” asked Michael.

“Piece of cake,” said Nancy as she already had the guard sighted in through a gap in the canvas.

“I’ve got the second guard standing by the building,” said Brian.

“I’ve got the guy in the booth,” said Greg.

“Erik, you take the one coming to the truck, that sets everything off,” said Thomas. He could see Erik had pulled his pistol out and was prepared to fire when he climbed on board the truck.

“Warbucks, Snoopy, we are ready,” said Darren silently over the radio.

The IU soldier climbed towards the cab and was heard talking with Nadir. As soon as he reached the top and looked inside, Erik pointed his pistol and shot one round right into his head. He swung around to engage the second guard at the right of the truck, but saw the man had already been shot by Hans Wolf from the cargo area.

Nancy’s shot was true and went right into the chest of the man behind the machine gun and the others immediately fired from the truck, hitting their targets as well. They were immediately replaced by the Germans as all eight hopped out of the truck and started sweeping through the would be ambush zone towards the surprised IU soldiers. Erik jumped out and joined the group, providing cover fire into a building which appeared to house some of the IU troops.

Thomas led the charge against the main building and heard Darren calling for his team to do the same from his side. But before they got to the building, they were cut short by machine gun fire from the nest. The assistant gunner had taken the place of the dead gunner and was providing fire onto the team as they were preparing to charge. Additionally, there were two machine gun nests beyond the checkpoint and they opened fire as well, hitting the first truck just as the last German hopped out and took cover behind a concrete barrier. Nadir was unable to get out quick enough and was hit by the machine gun fire while attempting to exit. He rolled onto the ground dead as his rifle clattered to the ground beside him.

Greg sent long bursts of suppressing fire towards the nest with his Ultimax SAW, helping keep the head of the gunner down. Amber got into a position to engage and loaded a short range grenade into her launcher prior to firing. The remainder of the team engaged targets as they could as the IU troops were caught completely off guard.

“Danger close!” screamed Amber as she aimed the launcher and gave her teammates a chance to seek cover. A second and a half later, she pulled the trigger and sent the fat round straight into the port of the slightly elevated position. While it was made of sandbags, the super quick round exploded and caught the gunner in the shrapnel pattern and disabled the gun.

By this time, Darren’s and Rick’s teams had moved forward and started clearing out the buildings on the other side and were taking fire from the additional machine gun to their front. They took cover where they could as the rounds slapped against the concrete, steel and wood keeping them effectively pinned in place. Thomas and his team had rushed the small building to their front as Willy engaged the windows with his Heckler and Koch machine gun. He lifted the fire just as Thomas reached the area by the left side and prepared to toss a grenade into the broken window.

The spoon shot off the grenade and he waited calmly for three seconds before tossing it inside. Shouts in Arabic were heard and a scramble of feet as the explosion tore the wooden door off the hinges and screams were heard. Thomas quickly entered with Amber and shot the two survivors

of the grenade attack. Amber put another round into one that looked potentially still alive as the second machine gun nest opened fire on the building. She came from across the room and tackled him to the ground just as the bullets sacked into the wall opposite of where he would have been standing.

“Remind me later to thank you,” he said.

“If we get out of this alive,” she said.

Outside, Fazil saw his dead brother lying next to the truck and was quickly enraged. He picked up his AKM and moved towards the front of the checkpoint, firing from the hip and screaming as he ran. But his efforts only speeded up the inevitable. He was quickly hit by both machine guns and fell fairly close to his brother, dead before he hit the ground.

The remaining team members were attempting to establish a line of fire on the two gun positions, but they had been expertly sighted and covered the entire front of the roadblock. Each time a member attempted to move from their position, they were engaged by the crossfire of the nests. Greg attempted to place some covering fire on the first nest in order to get one of the marksmen into the clear to their left, but was hit just after he pulled the trigger. A round skimmed down the side of his gun, completely wrecking the feeding device, leaving him with an eighteen pound club in his hands. He was also hit in the left forearm by one of the bullets before being jerked to the ground by Brian.

“Are you insane?!” demanded his best friend.

“We have to do something!” explained Greg as he looked over his wound. Brian grabbed at a combat dressing and ripped open the package to apply it.

“Demo, can you get into a position to take out that left gun?” asked Thomas.

“No can do! They’ve got me pinned!” shouted Frank.

“Giggles?” asked Thomas.

“Negative!” shouted Nancy.

“Trouble?” asked Thomas.

“Sorry boss!” she answered.

“Anyone got a shot?” demanded Thomas.

And even as the machine guns continued to provide fire onto their location, it was suddenly quiet as nobody answered. And sure enough, the team was trapped.

CHAPTER 18 – THE LONG MARCH

Date/Time: 20 March/1031

Location: Wittlich, Occupied Germany

A knock at the door was heard. The citizens of Germany always lived in fear of knocks, whether in the middle of the day or after dark. One never knew if it was friendly neighbors or the IU “Task Force on Religious Matters” coming to visit. The lady went to the door and peeked out the side window to see a man standing outside, looking fairly normal. He was not being followed by armed IU soldiers as was usually the case with the official IU representatives.

Taking a deep breath, she opened the door and looked at the man. “*Guten tag?*” she asked as more of a question rather than a greeting.

“*Tag, Frau Werner?*” asked the man.

“*Ja, Ich bin Frau Werner,*” she said somewhat puzzled since she did not know the man standing at her door.

He simply reached into his pocket and withdrew an envelope and handed it over. Without saying anything else, he turned and left the residence on the outskirts of Wittlich.

She quickly went back inside and opened the sealed letter which looked like it had a rough time in transit. The letter was a simple affair, on plain bond paper and hand written, but photocopied away from the original. She immediately recognized the writing and broke out in tears at seeing who it was from.

Liebe Mutter und lieber Vater,

Ich bin am Leben und wohlauf und treffe in England Vorbereitungen für den Tag ,an dem unser Land von der Islamischen Union befreit sein wird. Ich hoffe, ihr seid wohlauf und guter Hoffnung, dass Deutschland wieder frei sein wird. Wir werden bald kommen, um unsere Mitbürger zu befreien, und viele gute Leute arbeiten mit uns daran, die Zukunft unserer Heimat zu sichern. Bitte seid meiner wegen unbesorgt, ich bin gesund und arbeite unermüdlich daran, die Frauen und Männer, die unter meinem Kommando stehen, auf die Schlacht vorzubereiten. Ich bin im Moment damit beschäftigt, einigen Amerikanern bei ihren Vorbereitungen für einen Angriff auf die Islamische Union zu helfen, der in der Nähe von unserem Zuhause stattfinden soll, und hoffe, er wird uns unseren Zielen näher bringen.

Vergesst nie, eines Tages werden wir wieder siegreich vereint sein, frei von jeglicher Unterdrückung. Ich kann es kaum erwarten, den Tag zu erleben, an dem unser Land wieder befreit sein wird von jeglichem Bösen, und siegreich nach Hause zurückzukehren, um euch wiederzusehen. Ich weiß nicht, ob meine vorherigen Briefe euch erreicht haben, doch sende ich diesen Brief in der Hoffnung, dass ihr ihn bekommt.

In Liebe,

Euer Sohn, Jarvis

(Dear Mother and Father,

I am alive and well in England preparing for the day we will liberate our country from the evils of the Islamic Union. I hope this letter finds you well and in good spirits knowing our country will again be free. Know that we are coming to free our people and we have good people working with us to ensure our nation's future. Please do not worry about me as I am in good health and constantly working to prepare the brave men and women under my charge for battle. I am currently helping some brave Americans prepare to strike against the Islamic Union near our home and hopefully it will help our cause.

Remember, one day we will be reunited in victory and free from oppression. I cannot wait for the day to see our country liberated once again from the clutches of evil and to come home victorious and see you once again. I do not know if my other letters have found their way to you, but I am sending another just in case.

With Love

Your son, Jarvis)

In the letter, the word "England" had been marked out by Amber as well as the last sentence in the first paragraph describing his current duties. While chances were their mission would be over by the time it reached the intended hands, one could never be too careful.

She read and reread the letter several times, each time crying more and more knowing her son was alive and well. He had departed several years before attempting to get to England where he could continue fighting against the invaders. She wondered why several spots had been blacked out and decided it was best she didn't know. But no matter what, her son was alive and well for the time being.

She hid the letter as best as she could in the house and immediately went downtown to the shop her husband worked to bring him home. While they knew they could never tell anyone about the letter, it finally gave them a bit of peace in their souls of knowing what happened to their son after he left home. But it also gave them terror in knowing he would be putting himself in harm's way once again when the invasion of the continent started.

“Operations Center, Sergeant Yaseen,” said the tired controller at the command post at Spangdahlem. Communications were just now coming back online for the area and he had worked since midnight to hotwire everything he could to get this far. But as soon as one thing was completed, another two systems would fry, necessitating the need for more repairs.

“This is Checkpoint 89! We are under attack!” yelled the voice in the phone with machine gun fire in the background.

“What kind of attack?” asked the controller, still not fully alert.

“Someone came driving up in our trucks and started shooting at us! They are still attacking us, but we have them pinned down for the moment!” yelled the voice at the other end of the phone.

“Are you sure it is not our own troops? We have had several instances of friendly fire over the past twelve hours,” said the controller.

“Yes I am certain it is not our people you fool! I think they are Americans!” yelled the scared Corporal.

That little tidbit jarred the controller back to life as he sat up in his chair and snapped his fingers at a nearby Lieutenant. They were under orders to take any calls of possible Americans serious and notify the chain of command immediately. “What leads you to believe they are Americans?”

“They do not wear our uniforms and are shooting American weapons!” yelled the Corporal.

“Are you certain they are Americans?” asked the Lieutenant after he picked up the same line from a different station.

“Let me get out of this position and put one on the phone for you! Maybe then you will believe me!” said the Corporal as his voice was drowned out by an explosion. “They are trying to hit us with hand grenades, but we are too far back!”

“Can you hold them?” asked the Lieutenant, ignoring the blatant disrespect.

“I believe we can. There are at least twenty of them, but we have them pinned at the checkpoint. If you can dispatch forces from Prüm or Bitburg, you can catch them from behind!” said the Corporal.

“Status on the guard force for Prüm?” asked the Lieutenant.

“Just being dispatched now from Wittlich,” said a Sergeant at another station.

“Do we have anything closer?” asked the General as he was made aware of the situation.

“Sir, Major Haddad is at Bitburg with that infantry company, but it will still take some time to get him to that control point by truck. Not nearly as long as from Wittlich though,” said the Major in charge of the center at the moment.

“We have those helicopters that came in from Koblenz. What is their status?” asked the General.

“Being refueled at this moment,” said the Major.

“Send them to Bitburg and pass on this report to Major Haddad. Tell him I want prisoners if he can take them,” said the General.

“Yes sir!” said the Major as he started dispatching forces and preparing the report to send up.

“And I want every available troop we can spare to go northwest towards that contact report,” ordered the General. “And get me Fahd. He might be of some use to us in predicting their next move.”

“Yes sir!” yelled the Major once again. “You! Go find Senior Sergeant Fahd!” he yelled at a nearby Corporal.

“Where is this Sergeant Fahd?” asked the Corporal.

“The same place he always is, on the rifle range,” said another Corporal trying to wire back up a secure computer terminal.

“SMOKE!” yelled Thomas as the machine gun fire continued in random bursts. As they were well aware, the machine gun nests were about sixty meters away and covered each other very nicely. Smoke grenades were prepared for tossing, but smoke only limited the view of the gunners as they had preselected fields of fire that would cover the roadblock.

“Once the grenades get going, Demo and Tattoo, you two get up the hill and get a shot at them. We’ll cover you from here!” ordered Thomas.

“Got it!” said Brian and prepared to move.

“Piece of cake,” said Frank as he rolled away from the concrete barrier and crawled towards the base of the hill.

“Glamour, Kodak, Solo! Get some grenades downrange close to the positions!” ordered Thomas.

The three grenadiers carefully loaded the smoke rounds into their launchers and prepared to fire. They cautiously peeked around the sides of whatever cover they had and launched quickly before the gunners could react. One red and two yellow smoke grenades went off near the nests and spewed out more smoke, covering the area.

“Demo, Tattoo, now!” yelled Thomas when the smoke was thick enough. The two scampered away from their positions, not seen by the gunners and started climbing the steep embankment next to the Autobahn. They managed to get halfway up before they were noticed and needed to take cover wherever they could to avoid the fire directed at them. It did spread the group out quite a ways and made the gunners spread their fire more. Which in turn gave the main team a little breathing room.

“Warbucks, Tattoo. Be advised, I can’t see into the bunker. The gun crew is sitting back a ways and out of sight. The angles just aren’t right,” said Brian.

“Same on my end,” said Frank as he ducked behind his small mound from another incoming burst. “And there are side firing ports as well.”

“We can keep them pinned. Any chance of you guys getting closer?” asked Thomas.

“No. They’ve got me well covered,” said Frank.

“And me too,” said Brian.

“Brave charge?” asked Darren.

“No, there’s got to be a way around this,” said Thomas. And before he knew it, someone took it upon themselves to provide more of a distraction. Erik let out a war cry and rose from his position. He fired his AKM at the left machine gun nest and ran forward into the fire and thinning smoke.

“Major! Activity to the northwest of here!” yelled a Private who was operating one of the company radios.

“What? Where?” demanded the Major on Bitburg.

“Near Checkpoint 89! It appears they might have the American team in contact!” announced the radio operator.

“Where is Checkpoint 89?” asked the Major.

The Company Commander withdrew his map case and brought out the maps of the surrounding areas. "I think it is this one here," he said while pointing at the map.

"Sir! They are sending helicopters to pick us up and drop us in behind them!" said the Private.

"Time of arrival?" asked the Captain.

"Fifteen to twenty minutes. They are refueling as we speak," said the Private.

"Get your company ready for battle Captain. But remember, we want some of them alive," said Major Haddad.

"We will do our best, but I will not risk my men unnecessarily trying to capture some of them," said the Captain.

"Only if it appears we can capture them. Otherwise, do what you must," said the Major.

The Captain went off and started giving orders to his Platoon Leaders and other leadership within the Company. The men were slightly scared, but they far outnumbered the FNC team on the ground. And numbers counted in this game.

The Corporal dispatched from the Spangdahlem Base went over to the rifle range where a single man was busy taking shots at a five hundred meter target. The range was on the back side of Spangdahlem near the village of Binsfeld and served as the shooting range for the IU soldiers in the local area. He was taking his time in lining up a target for his Mk 12 Special Purpose Rifle, a battlefield pick up from his time in North America. Another round was fired and a hit was made at the five hundred meter point as evidenced by the clang from the steel target heard in his position and the target gently swaying. The man firing had not acknowledged the presence of the individual, but knew he was behind him. He fired the remaining round in the magazine and ended up with another hit at the three hundred meter target.

The Corporal thought it strange the man was out here alone after the large attacks of the night prior. And even more so since the man seemed as if nothing had gone on. He had walked up silently and was waiting for the man to finish up doing whatever he was doing before announcing his presence.

"May I help you?" asked the man as he cleared out the rifle and had yet to turn around.

"Sir, your presence is requested by the General," said the Corporal.

"Which General would that be?" asked the man as a slight joke.

“The Commanding General sir,” said the Corporal wondering which other General might be summoning this man.

“Is this immediate?” asked the man.

“When a General requests your presence, you might think it to be important,” said the Corporal who wondered exactly who this person was. He was fairly new to the area and didn’t know who he was dealing with exactly. The man in front of him was special in ways he had no idea about.

The man finished gathering the two magazines and brass and stood up. Forty rounds fired and thirty nine hits at ranges from one hundred to six hundred meters. And he only counted the shots that might have incapacitated a target which meant they hit the eight inch steel plate in the center of the target. He had actually hit all forty targets, but some of them would only have wounded the real life individuals he would have been shooting at. The winds had not been with him that day especially on the longer range targets. But all in all he was not satisfied with his performance and knew perfection needed to be obtained. He put the expended brass in a small cloth bag so he could reload them himself at a later time and the rifle into a hard case for the transport back to the base. Another three magazines were inside in case he needed the rifle on the way back. With the current insurgent activity, he knew there was always that chance of having to defend himself and sixty rounds would be more than what was needed in case that happened.

The man followed the Corporal back to a former civilian vehicle, an American truck taken into use by the Islamic Union upon their arrival. The black paint was faded and chipping away, but the motor seemed to be in working order. They drove the short distance back to the gate and were allowed entry after showing their identification cards.

“Can you go by my barracks so I can store my weapon,” asked the man.

“No, I must get you to the headquarters quickly,” said the Corporal.

“You should learn patience my young friend. Good things come to those who wait and do not rush about doing this or that. Slow is smooth, smooth is fast,” said the man with wisdom beyond his years.

The Corporal wasn’t sure what to say at that moment and wondered who the man was to keep the General waiting. The drive to the headquarters was short and the man left the Corporal behind as he gathered his small pack, the rifle case and his hat and walked the short distance to the building. He went past the guard at the door who knew him on sight and straight to the General’s office. The Captain at the exterior saw him and called the command center to notify the General that Fahd had arrived. The General informed him to make the Senior Sergeant comfortable until his arrival.

“May I leave my weapon here with you?” asked the man very politely.

“Yes Sergeant Fahd, I will secure it here,” said the Captain.

The man left the rifle case at the desk and went to a nearby chair and went immediately to sleep. He felt like he would need all he could get over the next few days even though he didn't know the mission.

Thomas looked on in amazement as Erik stormed his way through the smoke shooting from the hip as he did so. Like the kamikaze warriors from the Pacific campaign during World War II, he screamed bloody murder as he approached the machine gun nests. Thomas could see the machine gun rounds whipping through the smoke around him causing holes to appear and tiny vortexes. They were coming close, but never hitting.

He managed to make it to the first bunker and took up a spot on the outside. Ripping an IU grenade out of his pouch, he pulled the pin and let the spoon flip off. He cooked the grenade off for three seconds before tossing it into the left firing port. Yells in Arabic were heard from the inside a split second before the grenade went off. In the meantime, he had grabbed a second grenade and was waiting for the fuse to burn down once again. Another three seconds passed and he tossed this one in the front of the bunker, earning shots from the second position in the meantime.

The second grenade went off and he spun around to empty his entire magazine into the firing port on the covered side of the nest. There was no way of being able to get inside the nest without climbing through the door or front firing port, but Erik withdrew his pistol and peered inside. Thomas knew it was a great risk at doing so, but saw him make several more shots from the captured Glock copy before yelling back. His voice was drowned out over the fire from the second machine gun nest, but they saw him waving his arm at them.

"Ain't no way I'm heading out there now," said Michael as he observed the smoke cleared enough.

"It does make us sitting ducks," said Greg, holding his pistol in his right hand.

"Yeah, but half the fire now and we can effectively engage the second one without getting worried about getting his by the first one," yelled Darren from his position.

"Yeah, we switch back and forth with the fire and get it done the old fashioned way," said Willy as he prepared to put some fire back on the nest.

It seemed Erik motivated the troops and provided just enough distraction to give them an effective plan. Thomas still wondered why he made the suicidal charge, but also how he never got hit. God was surely smiling on him that day.

“Snoopy! Your team for ten seconds, my team for ten seconds, repeat minus one second each time,” yelled Thomas.

“Let’s do it!” yelled Darren to his two teams and poked around the side of the cover they were behind and placed fire on the bunker. They were specifically aiming for the firing ports in hopes of hitting one of the defenders inside.

“Cover me!” announced Nancy as she crawled away from the group towards the now bullet ridden shack. Something had caught her eye before they were pinned by the two machine gun nests and she was determined to get to it. The remainder of her team fired several shots within the ten seconds they were supposed to before the gunners bracketed the area once again.

Nancy crawled into the doorway and managed to avoid the shattered glass for the most part. She spied what she was after now lying on the floor nearby and went immediately over to it. Luckily, the building had sandbags around the bottom so the fire wasn’t penetrating the walls this close to the ground. She quickly looked over the device and saw it appeared to be in working order. She spied the rest of what she was looking for still stacked in the corner, protected by the same sandbags that were protecting her. She grabbed two of the package and drug them outside with the original item.

“I’m going to need some cover!” she yelled as she got into a position and started readying the RPG-29 launcher. While somewhat familiar with it from the foreign weapons training they had received, she still had to reach back into long unused memories to determine how to load it. “Clear me a back blast area!”

Since Greg was incapacitated in the current fight, he checked behind her for any obstructions as she prepared the tandem warhead for firing. “Back blast area clear!”

“Give me all the covering fire you’ve got!” she yelled and got ready to fire the monster anti-tank weapon.

The teams immediately responded and went around whatever cover they had and started firing everything in their arsenals at the bunker to keep the heads of the occupants down. She crawled around the side of the barrier far enough to see the nest and prepared the rocket propelled grenade for firing. It wasn’t that hard to aim, but she couldn’t remember the minimum arming range of the weapon. But at the very least, it would give them something else to think about. Flipping the safety off, she fired the round at the bunker and prayed as it exploded out of the tube. The rocket fired as it was supposed to and burned out prior to exiting the tube as it was designed, but failed to detonate once it reached the target. They could see the back end of the rocket sticking out of the sandbags surrounding the position.

“It’s within the minimum range!” yelled Martin, the expert on the foreign weapons. “You got one of the thermobaric bombs?”

“I don’t know! It’s in Arabic!” yelled Nancy.

“Well, shoot it anyway! It gives us something to detonate and hopefully take that nest out of action,” said Rob from the other side of the road.

Nancy started reloading the massive launcher, which was taller than she was, and managed to get the next round loaded into the tube. Once again, the teams covered her as she fired the second round just as the machine gun started to fire in her direction. The warhead streaked into the firing port in the front and nothing happened for a split second. But then it appeared the entire nest came apart as the fuel air explosive charge went off inside the confined space. The entire bunker was leveled in the resulting explosion.

Cheers were heard from around the group as it became eerily quiet after the machine gun fire had drowned out everything over the past several minutes. Nancy was slapped on the back repeatedly by everyone and the groups evaluated their status once again.

“I think I’m bleeding once again,” said Nate as he looked at his arm. Scott went over to check on him as he finished checking on Greg. Brian’s hastily applied bandage would be good enough for the moment and the bleeding was under control.

“LACE report, quick and we need to move. I’d be willing to bet there’s a response force heading this way right now,” said Thomas. “Snoopy, get us a plan to get out of here.”

“Trucks are dead boss,” said Martin who was already checking on the vehicles.

“No way of getting them started?” asked Rick.

“The front one took enough rounds to make it into Swiss cheese. The second had a lucky hit to the alternator,” said Martin.

The rest of the teams took account of their liquids, ammunition, casualties and equipment. Ammo was redistributed among the teams and the Germans quickly stripped the IU dead of their magazines.

“What were you thinking?” demanded Thomas after approaching Erik away from the group.

“My life is of no concern. Getting your team out of here only helps our efforts. I needed to do something to help our situation,” said Erik.

“Your people need your leadership to get through this! You cannot make yourself a target like that!” exclaimed Thomas.

“Better I am a target than you or any of your team. And if I die, I die for Germany,” said Erik with resolve.

Thomas knew he wouldn’t be able to change the man’s mind and went back to his team. Packs were being collected out of the trucks and prepared for movement.

“Found something that can help boss,” said Rick.

“What’s that?” asked Thomas.

“Remember that intel brief that said the IU was starting to produce the old FN P90 weapons for rear area troops? Well, guess what we found?” said Rick.

“Enough ammo for Baldy and Grumpy?” asked Thomas.

“I think so. Ten mags apiece. Give them five hundred rounds and it isn’t that heavy,” said Rick. “Plus, they can fire them one handed if they need too.”

“Go for it. Just redistribute the rest of their ammo. What about the SAW?” asked Thomas.

“Complete loss. Actions are torn to pieces. He’s lucky he didn’t get a round in the face,” said Rick.

“He loved that gun,” chuckled Thomas. “Anything antitank we can carry with us?”

“Nothing except a few more rounds for that RPG-29. You want it that badly, you can carry it,” laughed Rick.

“No thanks...Giggles, you want to take your cannon with you?” laughed Thomas.

Nancy made a face at him and shook her head slowly. He went over and congratulated her for her quick thinking. She politely listened and bowed her head slightly with a look of determination on her face. Knowing time was of the essence Thomas went back to the team and prepared to move once again.

“We’ve got our course laid in,” said Darren as he transmitted the data to everyone’s communicators.

“How far are we talking?” asked Thomas.

“Eighteen kilometers give or take,” said Darren.

“And a little over eleven hours to get there. We can do it,” said Thomas. “Badaa, you want to take the lead? You’ve got the healthy team.”

“Sure, let’s get cracking,” said Rick as he checked the navigation portion of the device and headed off in the direction of the landing zone. It was a calculated risk, heading straight in, but they needed all the time they could get as they had a long way to travel.

Date/Time: 20 March/1142

Location: Checkpoint 89, Near Steinmehlen, Occupied Germany

“It appears we have lost the trail Major,” said the Captain after his troops swept through the burned out areas of the checkpoint.

“No, we will pick them up again. They are on foot now and have to be close by. They can move at most two or three kilometers an hour and it has probably been less than an hour since they departed. The helicopters are sweeping the area for us,” said Major Haddad.

“And then?” asked the Captain.

“We will put this company in front of them and ambush them,” said the Major.

“My radioman sent in the report as you ordered sir. The General said if we needed anything else to call,” said the Captain. “He is also forming additional units to assist.”

“We do not have all day Captain. Eventually these Americans will disappear into the forest and we will never find them,” said the Major.

The Captain wondered why the Major was so adamant about finding the American team. Unsure of if to ask, he simply went about his business and called for the remaining helicopters to land nearby.

“Fahd, we have some work for you,” said the General without any pleasantries after he arrived. “Are you over your injuries now?”

“Yes sir, I am able to perform any mission you require of me,” said the mysterious Senior Sergeant.

“Excellent. One of our traffic control stations made contact with who we think are the bandits responsible for the destruction of the communications center. They ceased to transmit after a short time and the company following has run into some trouble. We would like to enlist your advice in trying to figure out what they will do next and possibly where they would go,” said the General.

“You need my advice on what I think they would do next?” asked Fahd.

“Yes, you think like they do and you have hunted them enough to make some educated guesses as to where they might be heading,” said the General.

“I can help as much as possible sir, but they are unpredictable by nature. And this is why they are good at evading our forces,” said Fahd.

“Yes, but we often have trouble thinking like they do. You, fortunately do not. You are independent like they are and might see things we may miss,” said the General.

“If it pleases the General, I will help out in whatever way I might. Did you want this help now?” asked Fahd.

“No, I want you to go out and make contact with the Major Haddad. He has a company at his disposal which would be useful to you,” said the General.

“Would you rather I take care of this little problem myself?” asked Fahd.

“Not entirely. I know you would like to deal with them in your own way, but it would be better if you had some assistance. Yes, if you happen to find them, you make do what you feel is necessary, but we would like some of them alive if possible,” said the General.

“How many of them are there?” asked Fahd.

“More than twenty we think. We are not entirely certain. They left two dead bodies of insurgents behind at the checkpoint, so not all of them may be commandos,” said the General.

“Where are they at?” asked the Senior Sergeant.

“Right about here we think. This was the last known contact we had of them,” said the General as he pointed at a map at the traffic control station.

“And who am I to report to?” asked Fahd.

“You will support the teams in the field, but you will report directly to me,” said the General.

“And additional support if I need it?” asked Fahd.

“We can give you any support you need,” said the General.

“For now I will work with Major Haddad and see what we can come up with. He is good at predicting their movements as well,” said Fahd.

“As I am too familiar with. He predicted the attack on the communications center,” said the General.

“Such things happen. You could not have expected it to stay a secret forever,” said Fahd.

“I could only wish it was until the end of my command here,” chuckled the General, fairly informal around the Senior Sergeant. “Do you have any questions of me?”

“None that immediately come to mind,” said Fahd, planning the mission out in his mind already.

“Go with God,” said the General as a way of dismissal.

Senior Sergeant Kareem Fahd was an unusual member of the IU Liberation Force in Germany. He had seen service in North America, Iceland, England and on the continent before being assigned to an occupation division in France. During that time, he had been injured during a raid by the French underground and sent back to Germany where he had recovered from his wounds. Along the way, the Commanding General had him reassigned to his sector to help teach the marksmen in the IU forces nearby. He was a talented sniper, but there was something special about Fahd. An Egyptian by birth, he had shown a deadly capability when conscripted into the IU Armed Forces. During his first time on the rifle range, he had scored top marks even for the notoriously inaccurate AK rifle. The instructors thought it might have been a fluke until he had repeated it again with two other rifles. They had also given him an SVD rifle to find out just how good he was and found his accuracy was far above average.

But one of his best attributes was patience. He had the ability to sit for long hours and even days and wait for the opportune moment to make his shot. He also had the uncanny ability to notice most everything going on around him and pick out the things that most would miss. While being a good shooter was a good trait to have as a sniper, the other attributes were just as valued and made him one of the top marksmen in the IU service. His record of kills far exceeded all others and he was often called on to perform the toughest assignments. While he had an impressive total, he never had the opportunity to take out an entire special operations team and looked forward to the chance of pitting his skills against the best the FNC had to offer. He knew he might not get all of them, but even taking five or six of those skilled warriors would put a serious dent in the capability of the team. He hoped his long range shooting would convince the remainder to surrender so the General could have his prize, but if not, he didn't care either way.

Fahd returned to his barracks which also had his equipment and weapons. Not knowing how long he would be out, he took his small field pack and looked through the various rifles he had collected over the years. While the IU was able to mass produce rifles with ease, it had yet to be able to produce a reliable weapon suitable for its sniper force. Most of the rifles he owned were battlefield pickups and “liberated” from the former arsenals of the European nations. The only decent rifle they had produced (in his opinion) was a designated marksman version of the venerable G-3 rifle still being produced in former Iran. Designated the G3B1, it was far more accurate than the SVD model most of the forces used, but still was not an entirely precision weapon. And even more so, it was only issued to the Special Forces units of the IU instead of as a general issue weapon. They still mass produced the SVD type rifles for designated marksman weapons.

But he ignored this rifle and went straight to the Arctic Warfare Magnum picked up while in England during the occupation. Since he was unsure of the ranges he might be shooting at, the .300 Winmag offered a suitable choice for long range shooting or shorter range shots. The ammunition for the rifle was being produced in a small factory in Serbia by skilled workers that demanded perfection for the odd calibers that were requested and was equivalent to what the FNC used in their weapons. He also had a reloading press capable of loading his own

ammunition and sometimes did. But his rifle of choice liked this particular lot of ammunition and he went with what his rifle liked as opposed to messing up a good thing.

He knew he would need no more than forty rounds. But he remembered something along the way. *Americans sometimes wear that lightweight body armor on their missions and it had a decent chance of stopping these rounds. Maybe I should take the armor penetrating rounds instead? Or a mix of the two would be best I think*, he thought silently as he picked through the various rounds he had stored and added in another twenty rounds of the armor piercing ammunition.

His storage in the old dormitory room of Spangdahlem Air Base was impressive. He had been given two of the rooms, one for sleeping and the other for storage when he arrived at the location. The General in charge knew Fahd was something special and the better treatment he received while he was here, the most apt he was to stick around. Hence, he had as good as or better than accommodations than some of the officers. The treatment was not lost on Fahd as he appreciated it and planned to stick around as long as the General required his services.

Fahd also took along another battlefield pickup; a Heckler and Koch P8 used by the German Army before the Fall, and ignored the standard Glock clone issued to the IU Armed Forces. It had replaced the American made Nighthawk 1911 pistol he had picked up in North America when finding ammunition was increasingly difficult. While he hoped he would not be close enough to the enemy to use it, it was better to have a close range weapon in case he needed it. He slid in a magazine of the 9mm shells and released the slide. De-cocking the hammer, he put the weapon on safe and slid it in the holster to put on his Spartan belt. Spartan only because of the somewhat lack of pouches and pockets as might normally be the case with others. He carried enough to get him through a mission and little more. If he had to evade on foot, he would rarely need a lot of the items many soldiers considered critical. But as such, he still took another three magazines for the pistol and packed them away on his belt. He also added in a patrol pack with what he considered the minimum gear necessary for survival until he made it back to friendly forces.

He checked the rifle before packing it away in a protective soft case and saw the General had arranged transportation for him to the affected area. Climbing into the vehicle, he departed the base at Spangdahlem heading towards the area where the company had been in contact, all the time focusing on how best to accomplish his mission.

“Dragon Lead, this is Atari. Be advised, we might have traffic for you,” said the controller on board the E-11A AWACS aircraft.

“Atari, Dragon Lead, go with traffic,” said the lead pilot of the flight of Pacifica F-16 fighters.

“Roger, possible helicopter assets near the border trace southeast of checkpoint fifteen. Intermittent signal. Break current orbit and head towards that location,” said the controller.

“Be advised, Dragon Flight is currently refueling and will be available in approximately fifteen mike,” said the Major.

“I copy last. Upon completion, head towards that area,” said the controller.

“Dragon copies,” said the pilot, wishing for something more than just helicopters.

“This is close to that special operation area. The one we were told to support,” said the controller to the mission commander.

“Yeah, last signal put them about right here,” he said as he poked at the screen. “Right near this contact. You think they are being chased?”

“Possibly sir. That’s why we need a grunt on board. It could help us analyze the data we get from the ground. You know? Proper mindset and all,” said the controller.

“What about the other assets?” asked the mission commander.

“Getting prepared to head inland,” said the controller.

“Major! Captain! We found them!” yelled the Private as he ripped off the headset for the radio.

“What? Where?” demanded the Major.

“Near the town of Brandscheid. The pilot of a helicopter thinks he saw them running into the forest nearby!” said the Private.

“Is he certain?” asked the Captain.

“They did not look like farmers,” said the Private.

“Get those helicopters back here and load the rest. Three hours we have wasted,” said the Major.

“But we found them,” said the Captain.

“Prepare to insert your company along their northern flank. We will trap them near the town,” said the Major.

“Eight kilometers in three hours. I think we can ease up a bit,” said Thomas as they pulled in for a security halt.

“I’m worried about that chopper,” said Michael.

“There were only four of you in the open. We can hope for miracles can’t we?” chuckled Scott.

“Well, there are miracles and then there is everything that happens to us,” laughed Michael.

“Should we divert our course?” asked Rick.

“No, I think we are okay. We are moving pretty fast and I think they might have a hard time keeping up,” said Darren.

“I do want to continue putting some distance between them and us. Break for another ten and let’s get going. Are your people going to be able to keep up?” asked Thomas of Erik.

“Yes, we must walk a lot and this is no trouble for us,” said Erik.

“Just checking. Your folks are looking a little ragged,” said Thomas.

“Well, maybe a little tired, but what you can do, we can do as well,” said Erik.

“Except go crazy and storm machine gun nests,” laughed Thomas, taking a bite of an energy bar. He handed another over to Erik.

“We all do what we have to do,” said Erik.

“We have a water source to the west of us. I suggest we get in there and top off before heading any further,” said Jeremy, observing the map.

“Good suggestion. Had I thought about it before, we might have gone there to call the halt instead,” said Thomas.

“Let’s get rucked up and do the rest of our halt there instead. Makes far more sense,” suggested Nancy.

“Yeah, I like it,” said Frank and was joined by the rest of the group.

“Okay, let’s head that way. Jeremy, already got the coordinates input in your device?” asked Thomas.

“Hold on...yeah, they are in,” said Jeremy.

“Snoopy, take your team in the lead and let’s get going,” said Thomas as he picked up his pack and headed got his carbine ready. The group moved out again at the pace they had set earlier and the kilometer to move wasn’t far by any means. They covered it in less than twenty minutes before coming close to the stream that ran south towards the Autobahn.

“Drink down what you can and refill everything,” said Darren as he came to a halt in the area. It offered decent protection both from observation and from fire. For the short halt, they would have decent cover and concealment. It seemed like everything was falling into place and they would be at the landing zone in enough time to wait for the bird. As long as they kept up the current pace that is.

“Helicopter Twelve stated he saw movement towards the southwest of the town,” said the Captain.

“Where?” yelled the Major over the engines of the helicopter.

“Somewhere near this creek,” said the Captain as he pointed at the map.

“Put us in nearby, maybe two kilometers away. We can march in from there. There is also a relief force of another Company coming up the road with armor. We can get them in behind and flush them towards the armor. We will be the hammer and the other company the anvil,” said the Major.

“You sure you weren’t infantry at some point sir?” laughed the Captain, thinking the plan had merit.

“No, I’m one of those people who sits behind a desk and dreams of being able to do what you do. What do you call them? A desk commando?” laughed the Major.

“Among other things,” laughed the Captain.

“If everything goes according to plan, we will have them right where we want them,” said the Major.

“Helicopters to the south!” said Heather as she alerted the group.

“How many and where?” said Thomas as he rushed to her position.

“Right there, about two clicks and coming in for a landing,” she said while pointing at the area. “Looked to be ten Hip transports. I thought I saw another one earlier, but it was heading in the opposite direction.”

“That could be a minimum of two companies of infantry,” said Darren as he pulled out his binoculars and scanned the area. The woods blocked his view.

“We just can’t catch a break. Make a run for it?” asked Thomas.

“Too risky. We set off and get caught in the open, we’re toast. Fight a running battle and we might never get to the landing zone in time. And they certainly won’t come in to a hot L-Z where we are being chased by up to a battalion of troops,” said Michael.

“We’ve got a decent site right here. Defendable terrain, good cover,” said Darren.

“Set up a linear ambush right here. That should give them enough pause for thought before continuing to chase us,” said Rick. “I mean, we only need enough time to slip away on a different heading.”

“Put my people out on the flank and rear security and your people on the main ambush,” suggested Erik.

“This is beginning to sound like a plan guys. Kick them in the nose and make them back off for a little while and reevaluate who they are up against. I like it,” said Darren, but conceded the decision to Thomas, the mission commander.

“I’m not really digging this, but it makes sense. Good natural cover and concealment. Good ex-fil routes. Good security and certainly a good kill zone to our front. Okay, let’s do this. Snoopy, take your team on the right, I’ll take the left. Erik, put your people on the flanks and rear. Everyone knows the order of fire,” said Thomas, not really liking the idea of sticking around in place and creating the ambush. But giving the soldiers landing to their south a pause for thought would help out their movements while they put more distance between them.

The four officers set off to put their people into place, but needed to do little more than find places themselves as the teams already heard the orders and were rapidly finding the best cover and concealment for their firing points. Machine gunners placed spare ammo next to their weapons and the marksmen started dopping the wind and gathering range for their rifles. Grenadiers also doped the winds as the flight of the large projectiles would be seriously affected by higher winds. Thomas, Rick and Erik made a quick check from the front of the lines to ensure everyone was concealed. From the edge of the trees, the entire team was concealed. Erik went on to make sure his men were in place and settled in to his position to the rear of Michael’s team. Thomas typed out a quick message informing command of their current situation and position. And then, they waited...

The helicopters had just dropped off the IU Company and were heading back to Spangdahlem when the first exploded in mid air. The entire group dropped to the ground as the burning wreckage fell past their position by a hundred meters and crashed in a loud explosion. The remaining Mi-8 helicopters started evasive maneuvers in the air, but met the same fates at the first as they exploded one after another. Three managed to escape the slaughter of their brothers, noses held low as they went for the ground in an attempt to escape by picking up speed.

The Major looked upward to see the distinctive shape of an F-16I screaming downward in pursuit. An AIM-9Y missile screamed off the wingtip pylon and chased another of the Hip transports, its proximity fuse detonating and shredding the engine compartment. The remaining three F-16s followed the first in an attempt to chase down the remaining helicopters and be able to put another green star under their cockpit when they returned to base. As soon as the aerial battle began, it was over as the remaining two transports shared the same fate as the rest as evidenced by the explosions heard and the column of black smoke nearby.

“What now?” asked the Captain.

“We continue pursuit on foot and I will arrange for trucks,” said the Major.

“Do you think they saw us?” asked the Captain.

“If they did, they will return with bombers and we will not have to worry about the enemy team,” said the Major. “Get your company organized and let us get underway.”

The Captain could do nothing more than move towards his Lieutenants and Sergeants and give the appropriate orders.

“Atari, this is Dragon Lead, be advised, ten bandits splashed,” said the Major in the lead Pacifica F-16.

“Copy, Dragon Lead, ten bandits splashed. Any further activity?” asked the controller on board the AWACS aircraft.

“Roger, we weren’t able to get them before they offloaded. Looked to be about a company of troops on the ground,” said the Major.

“Roger, can you provide ground support?” asked the controller.

“Negative Atari, be advised, we are bingo and need to return to the barn,” said the Major.

“Copy last, climb to twenty thousand AGL and return to base,” said the controller. “Might want to think about some help for that ground team.”

“They are going to need it,” said the Lieutenant Colonel tapping the screen.

“I’ve got movement...platoon strength coming from the south...another from the southeast,” said Heather quietly although they were far enough away that she could have screamed and they wouldn’t have heard her.

“And the other?” asked Rick.

“Can’t see them. Tree line is blocking my view,” said Heather.

“This is Badaa...SALUTE report....two platoons, one from the south, the other from the southeast, converging on our location in tactical formation, distance approximately one click from my present location, uniform of IU troops, time current, looks to be outfitted like a typical IU infantry unit,” said Rick.

“E-T-A our location?” asked Thomas.

“Maybe ten minutes,” said Rick, checking their movement against a known reference point.

“Think we can make a break for it?” asked Michael over the radio.

“Too late. We’re committed,” said Thomas. “We kick them in the crotch and head northeast from here. Open fire at five hundred meters.”

And the team just couldn’t catch a break. But they were prepared in a good site and could give the IU Company following them a really hard time. And now they just had to wait once again.

CHAPTER 19 – RIGHT WHERE WE WANT THEM

Date/Time: 20 March/1457

Location: West of Brandscheid, Occupied Germany

“That area ahead looks to be very defensive in nature. That is where I might hide and wait to ambush,” said the Captain as he observed the area through his field glasses.

“Are you certain?” asked the Major.

“Yes, I would wait for us to appear and make contact from long range. Once I struck, I would disappear in the confusion and head to the north or east,” said the Captain.

“Do what you must,” said the Major.

“There are some empty trucks we stopped on the Autobahn we had stand by in case we need to move,” said the Captain.

“Where are they located?” asked the Major.

“We put them off the road behind our position. The drivers were not happy, but they did not refuse my orders,” said the Captain.

“With our helicopter assets now gone, they might come in handy,” said Major Haddad thoughtfully. “I believe we have this American team right where we want them. Prepare your men for battle.”

“First Platoon, you will come in from the southeast, Second Platoon, come from the south, Third Platoon, come in from the west. Go to tactical formations,” said the Captain over the radio to his subordinates.

He could see the platoons were still fairly bunched up after walking through the woods and waiting for the call to go into battle formations. Lieutenants and Sergeant stopped for a moment and relayed the orders by voice to their troops. They were within nine hundred meters of the suspected site when the orders went out.

While they were waiting to ambush the company of IU soldiers following them, Thomas’ communications computer buzzed in its pouch. He knew now wasn’t the time to be looking at the display, but also knew it could potentially be important. He moved slightly and put the earpiece in before turning on the device. He saw a “request” from another device to synchronize

with his communicator and go into secure mode. He approved the request by tapping the screen and waiting for the two devices to link up.

After seven seconds, he heard a radio call through the earpiece. “Eris Red Five Lead, Eris Red Five Lead, this is Ruffle Lead, come in, over.”

Thomas wondered who exactly Ruffle Lead was and checked the device to see if it had identified itself. The only note that came with the incoming transmission was NAUAF, which he knew meant North American Union Air Force. The only way to figure out what was going on was to communicate back with the aircraft.

“Ruffle Lead, this is Eris Lead, go ahead with your transmission, over” said Thomas.

“Eris Lead, this is Ruffle Lead, prepare to mark location for incoming close air support. We are a flight of four Piglets inbound your location. We are currently orbiting over Orlenbach standing by to support your team, over,” said the pilot, leader of the flight of A-2A aircraft. The name “Piglet” came from the fact it was smaller, slower and carried less than the larger A-10C “Hog” and was dedicated solely to air to ground operations. Meant as a slight when originally conceived by members of the fighter mafia, the A-2 pilots immediately stopped using the “Skyraider II” name and endeared the new nickname for their aircraft. Although diminutive when compared to the more complex jet driven designs, pound for pound, it was just as mean and effective as its ancestor had been over the skies of Vietnam and Korea. And the pilots loved them as did the troops on the ground they supported.

“Ruffle Lead, prepare to authenticate,” said Thomas, following proper procedure and getting out his code card.

“Eris Lead, send it,” said the pilot.

“Roger, I pass you Lima Four,” said Thomas, giving the challenge.

“Eris Lead, I pass you Seven Quebec Tango,” said the pilot.

“I copy Seven Quebec Tango, state armament and fuel status,” said Thomas after checking the code.

“We are a flight of four A-2 aircraft loaded for close air support with rockets, unguided bombs, cluster munitions, napalm and anti-tank missiles. Full loads of 20 mil and 40 mil ammo with loiter time of twenty minutes. How copy?” asked the pilot.

“I copy, four aircraft loaded for moving mud. Stand by while I switch you over to our TAC,” said Thomas as he went to his other radio. He had four personnel capable of coordinating the airstrike, but knew Heather was the closest to Erik who could let them know of any resistance forces in the area. “Trouble, I need you to get on net...Alpha-15 and coordinate airstrike with inbound aircraft. Four Piglets inbound our pos. Coordinate with Erik on location of friendlies.”

“I copy Warbucks, stand by,” said Heather as she pulled out her own communicator and started switching the channel to A-15. Again it took several seconds for the two devices to sync up, but the tone alerted her and she did a radio check.

“You are loud and clear Eris-14, standing by for coordinates,” said Ruffle Lead as he saw the new communicator and call sign come up on his display. While the aircraft were generally unsophisticated, they had several technical enhancements built into the system which allowed them greater precision in attacking targets and performing close air support. And that was their main purpose in life.

“Roger, Eris-14 will now be call sign ‘Trouble,’ stand by for coordinates,” said Heather as she brought up the tactical GPS map of their location. Her position was already in the device and it didn’t take that long to zoom in on their location. She picked out the oval and pulled it around the outer limits of their team and included just a bit more for safety sake. The danger close for this mission would be one hundred and fifty meters, close enough for their tastes, but possibly not for their German counterparts. She located Erik before sending the data. “Erik, where are all your people?”

“I do not know, why?” asked Erik.

“We have inbound attack aircraft. I need to give them an attack radius so they know what to strike,” said Heather.

“We shouldn’t have anyone within five kilometers of this area, but I’m not sure about the other groups,” said Erik.

“So I can give them three kilometer radius and that should be okay?” asked Heather.

“Probably so,” said Erik, wondering if any other resistance groups were working in the same area.

“What about the urban areas?” asked Heather.

“There should be very few occupants at those locations. The IU has killed many of them off,” said Erik.

“So the towns are fair game?” asked Heather.

“No, avoid them if you can,” said Erik.

Heather pulled another circle around their location after pulling the map back out. She input the three kilometer radius and it showed on her map. A donut looking shape with their team in the center showed on the map with the three kilometer radius in red. She also made circles around the towns within the area as no attack zones and packaged the data up. She sent the data to the aircraft on the datalink channel which had been opened along with the frequency.

“Trouble, this is Ruffle Lead, call sign will now be Gopher. I have your coordinates and copy your strike zone and no kill zones. Four minutes out...be advised, we have a convoy moving north on the A60 Autobahn approximately eight kilometers from your location,” said Gopher/Ruffle Lead.

“Standby,” said Heather as she turned back to Erik. “There is a convoy on the A60 heading this way. Any chance of it being yours?”

“No, it is most certainly the Muslims,” said Erik.

“Gopher this is Trouble, be advised, that convoy is probably IU forces, you are cleared to attack it,” said Heather.

“I copy, probably hostile,” said Ruffle Lead. “Wombat, anything on the ECM?”

“Negative Gopher, no emissions,” said Ruffle Three.

“We aren’t taking any chances, Wombat, Curly, Beavis go to terrain avoidance, I’ll be the bait,” said Ruffle Lead as he nosed his fighter towards the convoy. While there were no radar or laser emissions coming from the convoy, there was always that chance of a self propelled anti-aircraft gun or heat seeking SAMs carried by the vehicles. They would make one pass and be on their way with the primary mission of supporting the special operations team heading for their pickup zone. While he was slightly climbing, the other three aircraft went to terrain avoidance mode flying at treetop level (and sometimes between the trees) to avoid visual and electronic detection until it was too late.

The convoy noticed the lone aircraft flying a little higher than normal and wondered if it was one of their aircraft or not. They sometimes used light aircraft for spotting purposes and wondered if this aircraft was attempting to locate the American troops operating on the ground nearby. Almost every eye was turned towards the aircraft loitering like they were not there.

“Ruffle Flight, be advised, one tank in the formation, four APCs, three jeeps and nine trucks. Curly (Ruffle Two) your target is the tank and drop one CBU on the trucks. Wombat (Ruffle Three) and Beavis (Ruffle Four), your targets are the APCs. I will follow around with another CBU drop,” ordered Ruffle Lead. “Trouble, ETA on your pos now six minutes, standby.”

The lead aircraft continued to fly somewhat straight as the remainder of his flight closed the distance rapidly. Ruffle Two popped up and illuminated the targets with his on board radar and found the distinctive design of a tank on his screen. He set two missiles to fly at the tank since one might not have gotten the job done with the newer models of IU armor and hit the trigger twice, sending the fire and forget AGM-228 Hellstorm missiles on their way to the target. He ducked back down as the other two aircraft repeated his performance on the other armored threats. Six missiles were inbound to bring about death and destruction on the IU convoy.

At the last moment, one of the IU soldiers manning a machine gun saw Ruffle Four duck back to treetop level and shouted out a warning to the convoy. The vehicle commander barely had

enough time to pick up the radio set before the first missile struck the tank. In this case, the tank was an older model and the warhead worked as advertised, destroying it and sending the turret flying into the air. The second missile hit at the back of the tank and spread its destruction to the truck following it, catching it in the blast pattern. The APCs swerved slightly before they too were hit and destroyed, their armor much thinner than the tank. The occupants of the trucks were already dismounting to seek cover and employ their handheld SAMs on the aircraft. They had faced the other way and did not see Ruffle Lead lining himself up to make the attack with a cluster bomb.

As he gained slightly more altitude, the probably path of destruction was being viewed in his Heads Up Display (HUD) in the cockpit. The path of the bomblets was fairly short, but encompassed nearly the entire convoy. He also knew Ruffle Two would be bearing down from the opposite direction and get what he had missed. As he reached the optimum drop distance, he clicked on the button once and felt a slight jolt as the bomb dropped from his aircraft. As soon as he could, he turned away and ducked down to treetop level like the other members of his flight.

The path of the bomb was spot on with the sides splitting apart and the load opening up. While unguided, there was little chance of it blowing off course at that distance. Ruffle Two saw the firecracker like explosions starting at one end of the convoy and ending at the other as he lined up for his own bomb run. The same effects were had as he dropped one more on the convoy, but slightly to the left as the IU soldiers were starting to run for cover in the nearby woods. He yanked hard on the control stick and moved the aircraft away from the zone as he had seen several SAMs being deployed on his pass. The second cluster bomb unit went off and more of the IU soldiers were killed or wounded as well as the remainder of their trucks being put out of commission at least temporarily.

There were few individuals that escaped without injury and they started gathering first aid kits from the vehicles to perform triage. The company commander was dead along with most of the company staff. The highest ranking individual at that time was a Platoon Sergeant who attempted to coordinate the actions of the remaining survivors. Ruffle Lead made a short pass nearby and observed the burning vehicles and carnage they had left in their wake.

“Trouble, this is Gopher, we are all yours,” said the pilot as they continued towards the waiting team.

“Roger, be advised, company sized element to our south coming from the Autobahn. That is your first target. After that, you are cleared to attack targets of opportunity,” said Heather.

“Roger that Trouble, Ruffle Flight, work in pairs, one spotting, one attacking, watch your sectors and let’s get these folks home alive,” said the pilot as he rejoined Ruffle Two in a loose formation. They could already see the target area and the communicator had superimposed the “no kill” zones on their HUDs. “Ruffle Flight, be advised, targets in the open approximately five hundred meters from friendlies...looks to be platoon sized formation. Wombat and Beavis, those are your primary targets.”

The pilot heard two acknowledgements on the radio as he and his wingman scanned the area for additional targets. Heather could hear the coordination as she picked out the shapes of the aircraft inbound to their location. She could see them lining up and preparing to attack and the smoke in the distance from the convoy attacked on the Autobahn. While they were confident in giving the company a bloody nose and probably being able to escape, having the four aircraft run interference for them almost guaranteed success.

“Wombat is going hot, Beavis, watch my frag pattern, going for CBU drop.”

“Beavis is standing by in Hi-Cap, Watch it Wombat, missile crew at the western side.”

“Gopher this is Curly, targets on the eastern edge, looks to be platoon sized element going for a flanking attack.”

“Gopher is on it, guns only pass first time around.”

“Good drop on CBU, Wombat! I’m rolling around for guns pass!”

“Watch it Curly! Mortar crews are setting up, southwest side!”

“Curly’s on it!”

“Beavis has a squad in the open! Going for guns pass!”

“Gopher rolling in at this time!”

“Wombat’s making another gun pass!”

Heather watched in amazement as the four aircraft performed their deadly dance over the reinforced company of IU troops. One of the aircraft swooped in low enough for her to see the stylized nose art of Piglet from Winnie-the-Poo holding a large machine gun in his hands and a cigar chomped in his teeth. The 20mm cannons in the wings spat out death once again at a squad of soldiers attempting to press the attack against the team. The cannon fire broke their spirit momentarily and they fell to the ground in an attempt to find cover. The remaining squads watched as their comrades were getting attacked in the open and decided to stay under the cover of the woods until conditions improved.

Even with the major radio chatter, she still wondered how the aircraft knew which one was which and how they knew where they would be turning next. It was like watching her team perform a battle drill in the sky. The cluster bomb went off as planned on the mortar crews and covered the area. The pattern also caught the second IU platoon that was preparing to charge the woods and attack the team. She watched as another aircraft rolled in and fired 20mm shells at the remaining personnel and fired the modified Mk 19 air launched grenades at the larger groups.

Explosions and fires followed as she turned to the next group. The lead aircraft had already made its guns only pass and broke the integrity of the platoon. The second aircraft was nose

diving in and she saw a 250 pound bomb separate from the aircraft. While unguided, at that altitude and distance it might as well have been placed by hand. Heather watched as the IU soldiers fired their rifles and machine guns in a vain attempt to down the aircraft, but to no success. She heard further radio traffic indicating success on the part of the aircraft though.

“Ruffles, I got the missile crew, but others seem tempted to pick them up and launch, anyone in position to attack?”

“Gopher’s on it!”

“This is Wombat, Curly got the mortar crew! Direct hit on location, following up with gun pass! Also, second platoon in the woods!”

“This is Beavis, survivors regrouping at the northern edge! Going for bomb run!”

“Watch the small arms fire boys and girls! They seem mighty ticked at us about right now.”

“Watch it Gopher! Heavy machine gun at your eight o’clock!”

“Wombat diverting from gun run, I’ve got this, standby!”

“Curly is taking a missile run on surviving mortar crew. Third platoon in the west woods near the L1 roadway!”

“Gopher is out of position! Anyone else?”

“Beavis! I’ve got it! Stand by for rocket pass and bomb run!”

“Wombat got the heavy! Preparing to make another gun run. Troops are regrouping!”

More explosions and more rounds were fired at the company. The aircraft were doing their best to keep up with the troops in the open and doing a pretty fair job at it. Every time more than three IU soldiers got together, they made themselves a target for an additional gun run. The surviving NCOs and Officers attempted to rally their troops in place and strike at the woods they knew contained the FNC team. But the aircraft were making things quite difficult to do. Adding in the fact Brian, Nancy and Frank were starting to take long range shots at the survivors from their concealed positions it was a mess command and control wise.

“Wombat this is Gopher, get ready for a CBU pass on that third platoon.”

“Roger, already rolling in!”

“I’ll mark with flares!”

“Watch it Curly! SAM! SAM! SAM! Break Right! Coming from your one o’clock!”

“Anyone see the launch site?”

“Negative! Curly, break left now and fire flares!”

The aircraft did as instructed and the team saw the brilliant flares popping out of the aircraft. The missile was diverted long enough for the aircraft to make another turn and escape the blast radius of the warhead.

“Anyone got that launch area?” asked Gopher.

Three negatives followed as Heather got on her internal radio net. “Anyone see where that SAM came from?”

“Guns has it! Tell the aircraft to watch for tracer fire!” yelled Willy Perez over the radio.

“Gopher, this is Trouble. Be advised, we know the launch area. Watch for tracer fire!” she yelled back into the communicator.

“Gopher to Ruffle Flight, watch for tracer fire marking the target!”

Willy dialed in the distance on his machine gun and let a quick burst loose for ranging purposes. He had to add a slight amount of elevation and started spraying the area in bursts for the aircraft to see while also suppressing the missile crew.

“Beavis has it! Rolling in!”

“Ruffle Flight, be advised, platoon regrouping four hundred meters to our south, preparing to attack!” said Heather over the radio.

“Curly is rolling in. It would be my pleasure lady,” said the pilot nonchalantly even though he was close to death a few moments before. “Prepare for bomb run danger close.”

The snipers continued to mark and fire on targets and the remainder of the team prepared to fire as well when the troops broke out into the open. However, their efforts were not needed as the aircraft were already inbound for a bomb run.

“Curly is going for 500 pound bomb run at half second intervals. Gopher, back me up.”

“Gopher has marked western woods and is en route to back up Curly, they are all yours, Wombat.”

“Wombat has your marking in sight! Lining up for CBU run!”

“This is Beavis, got the missile launch area again, nothing moving!”

“Good drop Wombat, 4-0 on target! I’m rolling in for rocket run!”

“Be advised, trucks in the open at the southern end of the woods. Looks to be...eight of them.”

“Wombat is on it! Beavis back me up! Standby for Hellstorm launch!”

The two aircraft were seen zooming away from the direct area and the anti-tank missiles flew off the wing pylons. Like using the proverbial sledgehammer to kill an ant, the missiles did the job very effectively and destroyed six out of the eight and set the surrounding area on fire.

“Beavis and Wombat preparing for gun run on the platoon to the southeast.”

“Curly is engaged at another heavy.”

“Gopher is engaged on squad sized group on southern area. All Ruffles, after next pass, regroup and state ordnance and fuel remaining.”

The four aircraft proceeded on their final gun and bomb runs prior to pulling off. They rejoined in the sky as the survivors on the ground attempted to regroup once again. Their efforts were being hampered by the harassing fire from the team in the woods, now added to by Heather and her precision rifle as well.

“Gopher, this is Curly, be advised, I have two hundred rounds of 20 mil, fifty rounds of 40 mil, twelve rockets, one Hellstorm, one 250 pounder and nape canister. Five minutes until bingo,” said the pilot very calmly.

“This is Wombat, I have one hundred fifty 20 mil, twenty 40 mil, nape canister and one 500 pounder. Six minutes until bingo,” said the pilot in a high pitched female voice. They often joked that she sounded like Minnie Mouse on the radio.

“This is Beavis, I have two hundred and fifty 20 mil, nape canister, one CBU, one Hellstorm and twenty rockets. Five minutes until bingo,” said the final pilot.

“This is Gopher, I have one hundred 20 mil, thirty 40 mil, nape canister and two 250 pounders. Five minutes until bingo. Break. Trouble, what kind of targets are we looking at?”

“Gopher, be advised, assorted squad and fire team formations in the woods to our south, six hundred meters. Two squads to our southeast at seven hundred meters and unknown forces to our west in previously marked designation. How copy?” stated Heather very calmly.

“I copy, break, Wombat and Beavis, prepare for run on the western woods, CBU and rocket pass, 500 pounder at target of opportunity. Break. Curly, get those two squads to the southeast side. I’ve got the southern forces. Save your nape canisters. Targets of opportunity after your next pass with all other ordnance. How copy?”

“Curly copies.”

“Wombat copies.”

“Beavis copies.”

And the aircraft proceeded again to deal in death from the skies. Ruffle Three and Four pounced on all available targets in the western woods while Two went after the remaining platoon of individuals on the southeast side. Lead went after the remains of the command group as well as the assorted soldiers just now coming together to figure out what was left of their once reinforced company. A lucky hit by a 250 pound bomb ceased all effective command and control of the company by taking out the Captain and his group. More explosions, cannon and grenade fire ensued as the aircraft didn't plan on going back to England with any ordnance remaining. The survivors of the aerial attacks hunkered down once again in fear since there was nothing they could do to stop the assault from the air. Some fired their rifles as the aircraft passed, but they might as well have been throwing paper wads since the aircraft were fairly immune to the small caliber shells.

“Trouble, this is Gopher. Be advised, we are going to set up for napalm run and then we are bingo. How copy?” asked Ruffle Lead.

“I copy napalm run. We are all hunkered down in the woods and have no inclination of being part of your barbeque,” said Heather with a laugh. It probably wasn't proper to be laughing at a time like this, but they had just been relieved of their largest threat they could have encountered while on their way to the landing zone. She watched as the four aircraft lined up and prepared to attack the targets at the different locations. She could see the lead aircraft as the wings waggled a bit and it lined up perfectly and the canister on the centerline station came off and went towards the woods to their front. It was a picture perfect drop as the canister broke open and spread its fiery load across their front. The entire team believed they could feel the heat from the weapon as it first ignited even though it was five hundred meters away. The three other drops went off just as planned, creating a wall of fire around the team and protecting them from a possible attack.

“Trouble, this is Gopher, we are bingo at this time and heading back to the sty,” said the pilot.

“Roger that Gopher, we appreciate the help and the first round's on us when we get back to England,” said Heather.

“We'll take you up on it. You need any more help, you give us a call. Ruffles, climb to ten thousand and prepare to egress,” said the pilot and he sent a message out for a refueling tanker to be available for them. They had burned off a lot of fuel supporting the team on the ground, but it was their job and one they did very proudly.

Thomas watched as the four aircraft climbed into the sky and headed off to the northwest. The wrecked IU Company to their front was now a little more than a platoon in shambles that needed to lick their wounds before mounting any kind of offensive operations. *We've got them right where we want them*, thought Thomas as he looked through the flames of the napalm.

“I think we’ve worn out our welcome and need to be heading out now,” said Darren over the radio.

“Yeah, these guys will be here for a while trying to regroup. Gives us plenty of time to make a break for it,” said Rick.

“Yeah, we’ll regroup two hundred meters to the north and get ready to roll,” said Thomas.

“Badaa, your team in the lead. Token, you and Giggle stick around behind us at a five minute interval with two of Erik’s bunch. Gives us warning from the rear in case they try to follow us.”

“Got it,” said Rick as everyone started creeping away from their firing positions. As fate would have it, the timely intervention by the attack aircraft had given them the opportunity to break contact with the Company and move to the north towards their designated landing zone. They rallied up, checked each other once again before moving out in a tactical formation heading to the north and relative safety.

Michael and Nancy stuck around with Alexander and Jonas waiting for the time to move. They could see the forces to their south tending to the wounded and attempting to rally up the remaining troops.

“I am sorry sir. I failed you,” said the Captain weakly as he attempted to sit up.

“No, you didn’t. Such things were out of your hands and in Allah’s. It is He who decided you were needed in paradise,” said the Major.

“Please kill them. Kill them all,” said the Captain before slipping unconscious.

The next senior officer was the junior lieutenant in the Company. They possibly had a platoon of men all together after the aerial attacks and he was quickly forming them up into makeshift squads and fire teams, helped along the way by experienced sergeants and corporals. The radio operator came over with an operating set and handed the mike over to the Major.

“Sir, we have met with some difficulties,” started the Major and went on to explain the attacks by the prop aircraft.

“It seems like more than a little difficulty, Major. Our armored convoy on the roadway was hit as well. How many men do you have left?” asked the General.

“Maybe a platoon of unwounded men. I’m requesting medical support for the remainder of them to be sent out to my location,” said Major Haddad.

“You shall have it. I am also putting together additional forces to send your way, but I do not know how long they will be. I will expedite the process,” said the General.

“My orders, sir?” asked the Major.

“Try to keep in contact with that team. Trail them and report their location back to me. I will attempt to place forces to trap them,” said the General.

“We will move within ten minutes sir,” said the Major.

“Do not try to be brave Major. Just shadow them and keep in contact. Do not let your men go seeking revenge for what has happened to them so far,” warned the General.

“I will keep them under control,” said the Major as he signed off. “Lieutenant!”

“Yes sir!” barked the very young officer.

“Make the men ready to follow that team. Prepare to go to the north, then the northeast,” ordered Major Haddad. The Lieutenant scurried off to get the men ready to move once again.

“Why that direction sir?” asked the senior most NCO.

“Cardinal directions. If I were the team leader, I would pick a standard heading and go straight for a distance, then move away from it. They will move fast on the primary route, then slow down when they change directions,” answered the Major.

“You know this how? I am just asking the question sir. I do not want my men chasing off in the wrong direction,” said the Master Sergeant.

“An educated guess. I have studied the special operations teams and this seems to be what they do most of the time when trying to break contact. West is the Autobahn and they will try to avoid that. South leads them to us. East is a possibility, but it runs into the town and into the area they just set off the napalm. North is the most obvious choice,” said the Major.

“Just so I know Major. In case you are taken out,” said the Master Sergeant.

“Let us hope it does not come to that,” said the Major with a sigh. He picked up an AKM off a wounded soldier and replaced his pistol belt with the web gear on the ground. He felt he might need the increased range of the rifle in case they met the American team again. The reinforced platoon was ready to move and the scouts had found a way around the fires still burning to their front. They set off in tactical formation, but moving far faster than the soldiers were comfortable with.

“Two clicks on the money,” said Rick as they came to a short security halt.

“Rally up,” said Thomas over the radio as the group reformed and took up defensive positions in the small copse of trees selected by Rick. “Token? Status?”

“Five minutes behind you. Be advised, I think we are being followed,” said Michael.

“SALUTE?” asked Thomas.

“Not clear. We can hear them more than see them,” said Michael.

“Close up and we’ll plan this out,” said Thomas.

“Roger than,” said Michael.

“Possible trouble,” said Thomas.

“Yeah, we heard. Want to ambush them? Can’t be more than a platoon,” suggested Frank.

“No, I would rather avoid contact. But a ruse might work,” said Thomas.

“Thinking of getting them following in the wrong direction?” asked Scott as he checked over Greg and Nate once again. Their bandages were holding and there was no additional bleeding.

“Yeah, if we can,” said Thomas.

“Sniper fire?” asked Brian.

“Probably. Two in positions and taking two shots apiece. Be seen moving in the direction we want them to think we are moving in,” said Darren.

“We should wait until Token closes up and then talk it over,” suggested Amber, suddenly serious as she normally was during the missions.

“Good idea,” said Darren.

It took less than five minutes for Michael and his small team to close up as they had been moving faster. “We have maybe a platoon of IU regrouping to follow us. We are going to need a distraction,” said Michael.

“We already discussed it. Two people, marksmen if we can and take a few shots. Gets them stopped while it give us a chance to shift directions,” said Thomas as he knew Frank and Darren would probably volunteer for the mission. Frank was their best sniper and used to working with Darren. Plus, the enemy would be more inclined to follow a sniper since they were hated among the FNC forces.

“I’ll go,” said Nancy immediately as she prepared to drop her rucksack.

“It might get a little hairy,” said Thomas.

“Which part of our missions don’t?” asked Nancy.

Thomas looked at Frank and Darren waiting for them to commit. But both had seen the resolve and determination in Nancy and knew they should wait until Thomas designated their team. They weren’t comfortable with the arrangement, but would wait until Thomas made up his mind.

“Anyone else?” asked Thomas, knowing the group would wait to see if he would accept Nancy’s proposal. Michael had an odd look on his face, but Thomas didn’t know why. The team was typically eager to volunteer, but in this case, would wait to see how things played out. They all knew Nancy needed to exorcise her demons and possibly this was a good way of doing just that.

“I’ll go alone,” said Nancy as she removed her patrol pack.

“Absolutely not. We don’t go alone,” said Thomas adamantly.

Nancy closed the distance between the two and got up closer to him. In a desperate voice and whispers, she pleaded with him.

“Tom, this is something I need to do,” said Nancy in a whisper.

“Let you go off alone and hold off at least a platoon if not more of IU troops? No, you know we work in pairs and won’t leave anyone behind,” said Thomas.

“This is something I *have* to do and I will take one of the resistance with me. I will double back once we have them occupied and heading in the wrong direction. Please,” she asked once again.

“Nancy...” he began but was cut off.

“You wouldn’t hesitate for a minute to send out Demo or Trouble or Tattoo or my father by themselves with this kind of mission. Am I so different? I need to do this,” she said softly.

“It might be a one way trip,” he said after a moment of thinking about it.

“All of our missions might be one way trips,” she said.

“Take their sniper with you. Meet us here,” he said as he pointed at the map and made a decision. He wasn’t happy with it, but made it anyway. “Get them heading either east or southeast away from our heading.”

“Easy enough,” she said with confidence she really didn’t have at that moment. She finished pulling the straps away to unhook the patrol pack strapped onto her main ruck. It was already set up with everything she needed.

“We shouldn’t need more than an hour to get a head start on them and don’t let yourself be boxed in and one more thing,” he said.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“Come back alive. I’m not going to explain to your mother why you didn’t come back with us,” he said.

“Don’t worry about me. Just get the team to safety,” she said, again with resolve she didn’t have in her mind.

The rest of the team started forward again and moved to the northwest away from their current heading. They would be heading in a direction the IU didn’t expect them. As they departed, each of them looked at Nancy one last time before departing and saw the steel in her expression. Each member wondered whether it might be the last time they ever saw her.

“We think we might have the trail picked up sir. The grass looks trampled slightly here,” said the lead Corporal to the Major. He pointed in a small field to their front towards the opposing tree line.

“Excellent! Good work Corporal!” said Major Haddad softly. “Prepare an advance party.”

So what do I do now? I thought this was the right thing to do, but I really didn’t have any idea of what I was doing when I volunteered for this thought Nancy as she settled down in the small depression with Alexander. *It just seemed like something I should do, but I didn’t know why. So now what?*

Movement was detected to their front as three IU soldiers came out of the nearby woods approximately six hundred meters away. Nancy carefully started sighting in over her rifle but was stopped by Alexander.

“No, they are...bait...something to catch fish, right?” said Alexander quietly.

“Bait. They are sending out three people because they might be killed?” she whispered back.

“The Muslims send two or three out to see if they get shot. Then more will come,” he whispered back.

And sure enough they waited until the first three were about one hundred meters out in the field before the main body followed. It was a platoon with two additional fire teams attached. She was able to sight in one of the ones who appeared to be giving orders. Alexander saw where she was pointed and targeted one of the machine gunners. “We shoot two times and leave to the east.”

“Two times. I’ve got the platoon leader and the machine gun on the left,” she whispered back.

“*Genau*, I will take the leader on the right and the machine gun there,” he whispered.

Not sure of who would shoot first, she sighted in and exhaled as she always did. She did not even realize her finger had tightened on trigger. The match round exited the barrel and went on its pathway which intersected its center mass of the IU Lieutenant who had stopped to give orders to a squad to flank the woods to their front. The projectile was efficient in proceeding straight through his heart. Alexander fired a moment later, having to lead his target slightly as he was still moving. However, his round found the target as well, wounding the NCO giving orders to his men to watch for snipers.

Nancy moved slightly to find the machine gunner just as he opened up with his PKM machine gun on the far tree line along with the rest of the ad hoc platoon. They were well out of range for the AKM rifles, but well within the capabilities of the machine guns. However, their fire was random and they were sweeping the area more than concentrating their fire on a particular location. The second shot was easy as she released the trigger after firing once again and prepared to move. Alexander had also hit his target, killing him in the process.

They crawled backwards from their firing positions and moved to the rear where they collected the gear they had left behind. After gathering the packs they quickly left the scene to the east as planned and fired two shots after running several hundred meters. The shots were not aimed, but in the general direction of the platoon still in the middle of the field. Alexander even braved coming out of the woods momentarily to draw fire and for them to see the direction they were heading in. Nancy made another shot at the group scoring a hit in the leg of one of the soldiers. The Master Sergeant saw them departing the area and informed the Major.

“Bring Fahd out here. We are in contact with the American team. We have two snipers he can deal with,” radioed Major Haddad as he attempted to get his men under control once again.

CHAPTER 20 – END RUN

Date/Time: 20 March/1550

Location: Near Winterscheid, Occupied Germany

“We had contact here and saw them moving east. They fired again from here and they moved eastward again. We have ambush teams set up here, here and here and hopefully are driving them towards the ambush,” said Major Haddad as he pointed at the map. An entire battalion had arrived and was under the control of the Major. He had set them out in platoon sized groups on likely spots of egress from the area, waiting in ambush. He hoped to box in the team and encircle them, slowly tightening it until they surrendered.

“You say you only saw two of them?” asked Fahd.

“Yes, just two and they have killed seven of the platoon in pursuit and wounded another four,” said Haddad.

“Pull your men back and reposition them Major, they are a diversion leading you away from the others,” said Fahd.

“I do not understand. We saw them heading east or northeast each time,” said the Major.

“Sir, these two snipers would not have made their presence so easy to find if they had any talent at all. They wanted you to see them and lead you away from their comrades,” said Fahd. “My guess is they are heading west or north.”

“Are you certain?” asked the Major.

“It is what I would do. When I exercise against your troops, do you see me after I make my shots?” asked Fahd reasonably.

“No, we do not,” admitted the Major.

“And am I not a decent sniper?” asked Fahd.

“One of the best I know,” said the Major.

“And the FNC is no different. They are trained to evade and escape detection just like I am. If you detected them, it is because they let you detect them. They are leading your men away from the main body of the enemy. If I was to guess, the main force is heading either north or west. Have your men checked the landing zones nearby?” asked Fahd.

“Not yet. I have the majority of the battalion in pursuit or in ambush,” said the Major.

“Where they are quite useless. I would start checking the landing capable zones within a five to ten kilometer radius and start moving out. I can make a call to the General requesting more personnel if you would like,” said Fahd.

“No, that will not be necessary,” said the Major who didn’t want the attention on him from the General. He didn’t want to seem like he had failed and had a simple enlisted man advise him. “What of the snipers?”

“Leave them to me,” said Fahd as he studied the map and likely courses the enemy snipers might take. He thought like they would have and picked an area he thought they would travel through if they were doubling back to meet up with their friends. It was actually fairly close by, but not on the Major’s list of areas that were being watched. He would have to move quickly to be in position to engage the snipers as they came back through. Or trail them and follow them back to their team. But that presented greater risk and he had not stayed alive this long to ruin it on being impatient.

Fahd also picked a likely landing zone and guessed the FNC team would be waiting there for transport. He actually made a pretty good guess as to the general location as it was spot on, but he failed to mention this fact to the Major. He wanted the entire team in his crosshairs before calling in for support.

He was correct in all assumptions that day.

“It is time to start heading back to the team,” said Alexander.

“You think they’ve been drawn off enough?” asked Nancy.

“Yes, I believe so. We have let them see us enough to give them a good trail away from your landing zone,” said Alexander.

“Maybe we should take one more shot,” suggested Nancy.

“If we go further, we run the risk of not getting back in time,” said Alexander.

“Okay, let’s head back then,” said Nancy as she checked her communicator and found their position. He was right in heading back and settling in before the transport got there to bring them home. But she still wanted one more soldier to be taken out of action.

He led the way through the woods after being given a direction by Nancy. They had gone about two hundred meters when he suddenly stopped and put his hand up. Movement was heard to their front coming towards them. They dropped down and kept a watch as the group would pass somewhat close to them, but was not headed right at them. Eventually a man came into view

wearing civilian clothing and carrying an old German G36 rifle. Another came in behind him carrying an AKM, followed by another individual in civilian clothing carrying an AKM. Their clothing was darker earth tones and blended in fairly well in the environment.

“It is the resistance,” whispered Alexander.

“How do you know?” whispered Nancy.

“Their clothing and the way they walk through the woods. They are traveling single file to disguise their numbers,” whispered Alexander and followed it up with a low whistle.

The three heads snapped over followed by their weapons being trained in their direction. Nancy hoped Alexander knew what he was doing when he did so and praying he was right about who they were.

“*Morgen*,” said Alexander in the standard challenge of the resistance. If it was morning, they would reverse the typical greeting to night. In the evening and during the afternoon, it was reversed to the morning.

“*Morgen, wie gehts?*” asked the man in the front.

“*Alle ist klaar. Ich bin Speicherer Freiheitskämpfer. Sie?*” asked Alexander in German.

“*Prümer Freiheitskämpfer*,” said the man in reply. “*Und die Frau?*”

“*Amerikaner*,” said Alexander.

“*Ah so*,” said the man with a nod.

“They are the resistance from Prüm,” said Alexander as he walked over to greet the men whose number now was at twenty. He spoke in rapid fire German to the leader of the group and was rewarded with a reply. For Nancy’s sake, he translated what was being said.

“He says the Muslims have been setting up patrols and ambushes around the area. They are heading out right now to engage one of them. The Belgian resistance is also very active in the area and has crossed over the border to help out in this area. They are also attacking targets of opportunity north and west of here,” said Alexander.

“How many are in the area?” asked Nancy.

Alexander translated the question and received a reply. “He does not know for sure, but twenty to thirty people in different locations.”

“Are they sweeping the areas?” asked Nancy.

He translated the question once again and received a reply. “He says there are some, but those that are out wandering around are being targeted by the resistance.”

“Does he know the exact locations of them?” asked Nancy.

“No, I already asked. He urged us to be careful out here,” said Alexander.

“I’ll radio the others and let them know,” said Nancy as she hit the transmit key for her radio. “Warbucks, this is Giggles, over.”

“Go ahead Giggles,” said Thomas.

“Be advised, German and Belgian resistance forces are near our location. Additionally, enemy squad and platoon activity in and around our location. Some patrolling and checkpoints. How copy?” asked Nancy.

“I copy last. Do you require assistance?” asked Thomas.

“Negative, we are all secure and enroute back to your location,” said Nancy.

“I copy last. Rendezvous at the L-Z,” said Thomas, worrying about Nancy in her current state. “Giggles said they met up with some other resistance,” said Thomas as he turned to Erik and another band of the German resistance.

“We have many groups out here including the Stadtkyll, Dahlem and Daun groups and many Belgians,” said Ernst to both Erik and Thomas.

“Lots of people out running around,” said Thomas. “Friendly fire rarely is.”

“Yes, but the IU is wandering from place to place and making our jobs of killing them easier,” said Ernst.

“And of our safety?” asked Michael.

“If you have Germans at the front of your patrols, they will not fire until they know for certain they are hostile,” said Ernst.

“And you said the aircrew is heading for the landing zone?” asked Darren.

“Yes, we passed them off to a group from Prüm. I do not know where they went from there,” said Ernst.

“We best be on our way,” said Thomas, looking at the time.

“Thank you for doing what you have done. You have ignited a fire in the people to resist like I have never seen before,” said Ernst as he shook the hands of the two Americans.

“We should thank you. You are very brave to fight against the Islamic Union,” said Darren.

“We will free our country or die trying. But before we die, we are sure to take many of the invaders with us,” said Ernst as he shouldered up an old hunting rifle.

“*Tschuss*,” said Thomas as the informal way of saying goodbye in German.

“*Tschuss*,” said Ernst as he and his group headed off in a different direction.

“I’m kind of worried about Giggles and Alexander wandering around out there,” said Thomas.

“They are probably in better shape than we are. They only have two and we have twenty plus. We are the herd of stampeding buffalo and they are the silent snake,” laughed Darren.

“Good point and Giggles knows how to hide pretty well,” said Thomas, still feeling uneasy about the whole thing. He tapped a request into his communicator to see where she was at and sent the request out over the air. Waiting for a reply, everyone was grabbing a quick bite to eat and drinking down additional water. They still had a ways to go, but the time was working out in their favor.

Nancy’s communicator buzzed softly at her. She checked the message from Thomas and saw he was requesting her position. She agreed to the request which was sent back to his device along with a request to his own device. They two would link up and send three signals back and forth to determine how far apart they were based on the calculations of the time involved to receive the signals and send a reply. It was a simplified way of triangulation and was fairly effective. Once she received the data back, she saw they were about five kilometers away and on course to the landing zone. She also saw she was marginally closer to the zone and already inside the old Belgian border. They might even arrive at the location before the rest of the team. Typically she would have smiled at the thought of surprising the group, but the corners of her mouth remained neutral.

But she was scared. She didn’t know why, but she had a feeling of fear sweeping over her at that moment in time. The feeling of dread, of anxiety, of being scared at the unknown. For some reason she felt like something wasn’t right and a great evil awaited them at the landing zone. Typically when she was with the other members of the group she felt more comfortable, but she felt very alone at this moment even with Alexander standing next to her.

But she kept the same expression on her face and tried not to let it show as they prepared to move once again. Alexander led off the small unit and walked silently in the woods towards the general area, his senses alert and ready for anything out of the ordinary.

“Look at that! She’s closer than we are!” exclaimed Thomas.

“She should make it before we get there unless she runs into some of the patrols,” said Darren.

“I’m hoping she and Alex can make contact with additional resistance and clear our way in,” said Thomas.

“Well, no matter what, we need to get going,” said Darren.

“Right, let’s get underway,” said Thomas after finishing off a canteen and putting it back in its pouch. He quickly typed in a text message for Nancy in case she arrived first to make contact with the Belgian resistance at the landing zone and attempt to clear their way in

Nancy saw the text message from Thomas and hoped she might arrive in the relative safety of the landing zone. She still wanted revenge on the IU forces in the area, but wouldn’t do anything foolish at the present moment. But if the opportunity arose, she would take the opportunity to kill a few more of them. While thinking of the sweet revenge, she absentmindedly dropped the communicator in her patrol pack and prepared to get under way once again. It would still work by using simple a simple Blue Tooth link between her earpiece and the device, but she wouldn’t know navigation for the moment.

She and Alexander knew the general heading they needed to go in and started off that way. The woods were clearing here and there and they remained alert to the local area before crossing. They were making good time although evening would be setting in soon and would slow their progress slightly. They reached a clearing and stopped as they always did, checking it before moving. Again, something swept over her and the feelings of fear returned once again. The clearing looked unoccupied and the other side invited them to come across to the continued concealment of the vegetation, but still she had that gut feeling.

Alexander stood to start crossing the area and a whiz followed by a wet splat was heard. The report of the single rifle shot followed as Alexander slumped down to his knees and fell to the ground clutching his stomach.

Nancy suddenly was swept by the fear again as she saw Alexander lying on the ground holding his stomach and writhing in pain. She was scared and got up to run away. She ran for fifty meters and flung herself on the ground, not knowing exactly why. Suddenly a familiar voice came into her mind. She didn’t believe in ghosts or spirits coming to visit and this was very strange for her.

Stop right there young lady! You just stop and think about what you are about to do! You get your butt up and help him out! The team is depending on you to keep the enemy occupied until they can get to safety. Get your butt back there right now and get this guy! It's only one man for crying out loud! Kill him and the rest of the soldiers back off thundered her father's voice in her head.

But I don't know how she protested in her mind, not saying the words out loud.

Oh you most certainly do, Nancy Samantha Dugger! Now you get this guy and help out Alexander to the rest of the group. You know Scott can save his life, but that's only after you get the sniper off your tails her father's voice said again.

But I'm scared Daddy she protested in the war within her mind.

Honey we all are scared at some point in our life. I've been scared before and I didn't know what to do. But it's times like these that define us. What we do when we are scared is not about how brave we are, but about what we do with that fear her father's voice said reasonably.

Daddy, you were braver than I am she protested again.

No, I never was, but I turned that fear into something I could use. I turned it into caution and proper planning and it worked for me. Let the fear work for you he said reasonably again.

I'm not sure if I can she protested once again.

I know you can! I've known you could do anything you put your mind to your entire life. And in this situation, it's about putting the fear behind us and letting go of any thoughts you have! Now you get up! Help him and kill this guy! Your team is depending on you! Get up Nancy! Get up and fight her father's voice screamed in her head. She knew she was imagining the whole thing in her head, but had her father been alive, that's exactly what he would have said to her right about then.

And as quickly as it had begun, the conversation inside her mind was over. The fear released its grip on her mind and she started to think clearly once again. Like a physical burden lifted, her mind was clearer than it had been since her father's death. And she came up with a plan. A quick plan, but a sound one and got ready to execute it. She knew time was of the essence and the enemy sniper probably knew he had hit one of the two. But being cautious as he was, he would proceed carefully looking for the other. She picked herself up and started moving back towards Alexander tactically and found him where she left him. Dropping behind a tree, she whispered at him.

"Where are you hit?" she asked.

"In the stomach," he said as she saw him covering his stomach with both hands.

“Bad?” she asked and immediately thought of how stupid that question was.

“Well, it could be worse. I could be dead,” he said with a groan.

“Let me get my aid kit,” she said as she looked for her pack and grabbed her IFAK from her web gear.

Fahd watched the area where he had taken the shot and knew he hit one of the two he was aiming at. The other had quickly run the other way and out of sight. Now the patience would kick in as he kept watching the area they had been in and the surrounding areas. He knew he had to be patient since this was the best way of drawing him in and taking another shot by their rear guard snipers. The individual he had hit looked to be a member of the resistance, but was in a camouflage used by the FNC. The other was dressed in a camouflage he was unfamiliar with. And since he was unfamiliar with it, chances were it was a member of the team he wanted so badly.

So he waited, patiently and without making a single move. He knew the rest of the team was slipping further and further away, but he could get into position in front of them by taking a simple vehicle ride up the road. He was enjoying this hunt and looked forward to taking the other sniper.

“I said leave me. Save yourself,” winced Alexander as he held his hands at his stomach from the sudden shot.

“No, we don’t leave anyone behind,” said Nancy as she grabbed the bandage and Celox from her individual first aid kit.

“Just leave and save yourself. I will hold him off,” said Alexander as he grabbed at his rifle one handed.

“I have a plan,” said Nancy as she started dropping her jacket. She pulled the pistol from his holster as she knew it would be far easier for him to manage the Hi Power instead of trying to swing around the longer SVD rifle. She set the rifle off to the side before giving him a look that she wasn’t to be questioned.

Alexander saw the intensity in the young lady’s eyes and saw her resolve in the situation. He also knew there was no chance of him being able to hold off the IU sniper in his current condition. He grabbed at the pistol with one hand and put his other over the wound. Nancy took

a quick moment to apply the Celox and put on a dressing and told him to hold it in place until she could tie it off. Before moving, she also noticed the exit wound from the blood on his back. She grabbed a second dressing and quickly applied it after applying more of the Celox. She grabbed her pack and ran a short distance away and started creating her plan out of sight to the best of her ability. A talented sniper was after them at that moment and she needed to act quickly to prepare her trap.

It took several minutes of precious time to get everything set up, but she finally had everything the way she wanted it. She knew the hunt was on and she would have only one shot at taking the enemy sniper out. She looked for her vantage point and saw the exact location she wanted.

After getting everything ready, she crawled behind her cover and camouflaged herself. She knew he was out there and while she didn't have a great vantage point, it would be okay for her plan. She peered through the scope at the far tree line, searching and shivering slightly from both the cold and thinking of her chance of failure...

Fahd knew he had fired and hit one of the two individuals in the woods across from him. He thought the shot might have been a bit low, but he knew it would be an incapacitating shot nonetheless. He had used the armor piercing shell since he was unsure of the enemy was wearing the body armor some preferred and wanted to make sure of the kill. But his bullet might have struck a small branch on the way in causing the low shot. But he would remedy that problem sooner rather than later and these things happened from time to time even for an experienced marksman like him.

Both targets had disappeared into the undergrowth after he had taken the shot, but one of the two had taken off like a rabbit immediately after. He thought he saw the other return and his suspicions were confirmed when he saw movement in the ground cover in the woods. Nothing clear enough to make a shot, but he could see there was another individual waiting for him. He smiled at the thought of playing the game of patience with the American sniper.

Fahd knew they were preparing a trap for him, or at least one wanted to avenge the other. But he would be patient and wait for them to make a mistake. Silently and steadily he crept through the woods to the clearing, taking advantage of the camouflage his ghillie suit provided. He knew about camouflage and concealment and practicing these traits came naturally to him. And in being stealthy, he knew he would be put into a position for the American to make a mistake, become overconfident or lose patience with him. He would be patient and wait the American out. Smiling at the thought of the kill, he began to systematically sweep the trees looking for anything out of place that might indicate the American's presence. And he continued to wait and watch...

Nancy saw something at the edge of the woods, something out of place, not the same and certainly unusual enough for a second look. To a casual observer, nothing would be amiss, but to her trained eye, something was out of place. Like wearing a black tie with a white shirt, Nancy immediately started looking over the area intently. She could see the grass was a slightly different color than the rest of the surrounding vegetation. Not a major difference, but enough to tell a difference. Typically, one would look right past the area without a thought, but if one looked closely enough, they could tell the difference. She shifted ever so slightly to see better and to line her body up for the shot she would take. Inching forward ever so slowly, she was getting a better shot, but also losing her concealment somewhat.

She peered intently at the area, looking for other signs of his presence at that location. But she also checked the remainder of the tree line just in case he was playing a ruse of his own. She didn't see any other signs of more troops but would remain wary just in case. She didn't want to leave Alexander for long as she knew the wound was fairly serious, but she also knew he could serve somewhat as bait.

Her suspicions were confirmed as she saw the grass move ever so slightly, again, nothing the normal eye would pick up. But someone was moving very slowly in the grass. Nancy saw it move ever so slightly, more so than the rest of the grass slightly waving in the wind. She couldn't see Fahd sweeping the tree line with his monocular, but she knew someone was there and waited to see just what kind of mistake he would make...

Fahd continued to sweep the area, not finding any traces of either the insurgent or the other sniper. He saw nothing out of the ordinary in the location as Nancy had camouflaged herself well, crawling under the leaves and branches of a small pile very slowly. The leaves accented the camouflage suit she was already wearing and the ghillie covered boonie cap covered her blond hair. Even so, it was tied up under her green do-rag and her face showed the remains of the camouflage paint applied the other day. The only thing that was really out of place was her blue eyes, but Fahd missed those on his sweep since they were in the shadows. He continued to watch and sweep, looking for the minutest detail that would give away the position of the enemy sniper...

Nancy saw the enemy sniper stop moving for a moment, but knew he was still there. Whatever weapon he carried was well camouflaged as well. She could not make out the outline of the rifle barrel, but again, she knew he was armed and there. A sound to her right startled her, but she did not move. She did sneak a quick peek out of the corner of her eye and saw a fox come out of the

undergrowth and into the open field. She turned her attention back to the location of the enemy sniper, her intense blue eyes continuing to peer through the scope; watching and waiting. She slipped forward slightly to get a better view of the entire frontage and continue to watch the spot on the grass she knew had to be the enemy sniper. The waiting was killing her, but she knew patience was invaluable in this situation...

Fahd saw movement in the trees and readied his rifle to fire. He saw the grass move slightly at the edge of the woods, but saw a brown fox stroll out of the woods like nobody was nearby. He watched it wander into the tall grass, probably looking for a meal. He turned his attention back to sweeping, now using the high powered rifle scope. Sweeping the trees, he finally thought he had something. Something was moving very slowly through the undergrowth. He increased the power slightly to his scope and watched as the object stopped for a moment, then continued its crawl towards the clearing. It was slow enough not to catch the attention of the casual observer, but he knew it had to be the enemy sniper. He had finally seen the mistake and would exploit it in due time. As he continued to peer, he saw the most glaring mistake he could have, the straight line of a rifle barrel. It was wrapped somewhat in burlap or some other cloth, but sure as he was born, it was a rifle barrel.

Fahd could have gotten buck fever like some would have and taken the shot, but he waited patiently for the most opportune time. But he knew there was a flaw in his plan. A tree would eventually block his shot if he waited too long. The forward motion of the sniper stopped for a moment and he wondered if he had tipped his hand somehow. But he was patient and before long, the other sniper started inching forward once again...

Nancy was getting restless waiting for the other sniper to engage. But she also knew the longer she waited, the further away the rest of her team would be. And even if she didn't make it, she knew they would be safe at the pickup zone and out of danger. But in getting restless, she shifted slightly to get a better view of the location. Only a slight movement, but enough to give her a commanding view of the area now. She inched forward slightly and brought the scope back into focus before looking back at the suspected location of the sniper.

She almost lost his location, but had marked the location by using a known landmark, a tree which had been split by lightning at some point last summer. She picked up the spot once again and continued to watch with the same expressionless look on her face...

Fahd knew the opportune time for his shot was nigh. At the current rate of advance, the other sniper would be behind the tree within five minutes. After that, he would have to reposition himself for the shot and that meant moving and potentially being located. He also knew the longer he waited the further away the enemy's friends were getting and they would be harder to reacquire. He heard distant gunfire, AK systems from the sound of it, but nowhere close to where he was. He knew he needed to move quickly in order to catch the sniper in the open and make the shot. He also knew it would take some time to get a vehicle to his location and get in place in front of the rest of the American team.

I have my target and the other should be dead by now. Why wait? Because patience has kept your alive so far and why stop a proven tactic, thought Fahd as he watched the maddeningly slow progress made by the enemy sniper.

But a primordial instinct took over. The thrill of the hunt, the chase and the eventual kill. He focused in on the partially concealed barrel of the enemy's sniper rifle and aimed slightly right of it, where the head of the enemy sniper should be. The rifle barrel was barely distinguishable behind some ground cover, but it was there. Doping the wind, he made a slight adjustment and knew the four hundred and fifty meter shot would be simple and the round wouldn't be pushed much by the gentle breeze. He had a decent shot right then and decided to go ahead and take it. He knew there were no more than the two enemies out there and also knew one of them was wounded.

He performed the same ritual as he did with every shot, whether in training on the range or in actual combat. The fundamentals came naturally to him and he altered his body posture slightly to get into his natural prone firing stance. His thumb flicked the safety off slowly and the trigger mated with his finger like it was made for him. Suddenly, rifle and man became one single unit of death. Measuring the distance one last time for good measure, he was satisfied with the shot. The rifle fired as the single round was sent downrange. He brought the scope back on target just as the enemy's rifle fell away from the ghillie suit concealing it.

CHAPTER 21 – NO ONE BEHIND

Date/Time: 20 March/1719

Location: Near Amelscheid, Occupied Belgium

“The German and Belgian resistance should be able to keep the IU forces busy until your aircraft arrives,” said Erik as he returned from a conference with his fellow resistance leaders. They were preparing to depart the area and continue to engage the IU forces.

“How far away is the landing zone?” asked Darren.

“Maybe two kilometers. The IU forces are moving southeast away from your landing zone,” said Erik.

“How certain are you?” asked Thomas.

“Nothing is ever certain in life. But I trust them and they have never let me down before. They have also retrieved the downed aircrew from the Daun resistance and are bringing them to the site. Will you have enough room in the aircraft?” asked Erik.

“We should,” said Thomas. “Let’s get moving and headed towards the landing zone.”

“Us or you in the lead?” asked Erik.

“Your countrymen and you haven’t gotten us lost so far,” said Thomas, worrying about Nancy at that moment. Only minutes earlier he had heard a single shot in the distance. Not like the 6.5 Grendel she carried or the AKs the resistance carried, but a larger caliber like a magnum. He had fired the .300 Winmag often enough to know what it sounded like, even from a distance.

Thomas had tried calling her on the radio as soon as he heard the shot, but she had not answered. Whether she was wounded or dead or just couldn’t answer he didn’t know and it worried him. He knew it might have been a mistake to have sent her instead of Frank or Brian or Heather. Not that she wasn’t capable, but he was unsure of her mental state. Not that it mattered now since the decision had been made already, but he still swore silently at himself for letting her talk him into it. But even if she didn’t show at the landing zone, Thomas had every intention of staying behind to look for her, even if she was dead.

Fahd waited several minutes after taking the shot to verify his kill. He knew they had some sort of trap set for him and they still could spring it. He also knew his single shot might have attracted the attention of others in the area, to include his own personnel who were quite trigger

happy. But nothing was out of the ordinary after the shot, but he was still wary. The Americans liked to...*what was it they called it? Playing possum? Playing dead in order to pull the enemy into a trap. Some kind of animal or other.* But the target wasn't moving and there didn't seem to be any further activity at the area of the engagement. Fahd rose out of his hide to one knee, but didn't move forward yet. Since he had moved, he slowly rechambered a round in his rifle and collected the spent brass.

Seeing he had not drawn attention just yet, he rose to his feet in full view of the far tree line. His body was covered in the ghillie suit, but the generally human shaped form was recognizable at any distance. He made a quick feint towards the woods, but received no response and drew no fire. He felt it was safe enough to cross over and verify his kills. And while doing so, would collect intelligence from the two dead for the Major. He would then leave and try to get into place in front of the remainder of the American team. Pulling back the hood on his suit, he replaced it with the standard camouflage field cap of the IU forces and started crossing the area.

While he crossed the field, he removed the magazine of the Arctic Warfare Magnum rifle and replaced the two rounds he had fired just in case he needed it again soon. He walked slowly, but with a purpose across the field, his rifle held at the low ready once he replaced the magazine. His ghillie suit fluttered in the breeze and he felt the same elation he always felt after a successful hunt. He would check the individual he had just fired at first since he was the more immediate threat and then check on the wounded individual. He hoped he did not need to finish off either of them since more gunfire drew unwanted attention. He had a knife to finish off the other when it became necessary.

As Fahd got closer, he started to see the outline of the ghillie suit the enemy sniper had been wearing. Or at least the slight contrast it provided as he got closer to the site he had made his kill. The rifle still lay partially underneath the suit and he noticed the familiar shape of the SVD rifle, even wrapped in the burlap.

But even as soon as he saw the familiar sight, a scream went off in his head. He knew no American forces would touch the SVD rifle unless they had no other choice. They typically used a rifle based on the M16 design in several different calibers. Or a bolt action design. Or an autoloader like the M14. They never used the SVD since it was horribly inaccurate compared to their precision made rifles. But that didn't matter right then and there as alarm bells rang loudly in his head as something was horribly wrong with the situation.

Nancy had lain silently and without moving while she watched the enemy sniper cross the field. She had been tempted to make the shot as soon as he stood up from his position, but knew it would be better in case he had a spotter waiting behind. Or this was the spotter and the main sniper was still waiting in the grass.

She watched him walk slowly across the field, almost looking like he was floating as the ghillie and long grass masked the movement of his legs. He stopped short of the woods where her decoy sat, the same one he had fired a round through. She saw his face change in an instant as she knew that he knew he had been duped. It wasn't the best shot or angle in the world, but it was good enough at that moment in time.

Nancy didn't notice the trigger traveling rearward or register the report of the shot. But she did see the impact of the round center mass of the enemy sniper. He was hit and going down slowly. Like something out of the movies, he first slumped to his knees and paused momentarily before falling to his left and dropping the rifle he carried.

Nancy waited for several minutes to determine if she was alone and did not see or hear any additional personnel. Much like he had done, she revealed her position and waited for the additional gunfire that might announce the presence of hostile troops in the area. Although she determined it to be safe, she kept the rifle pointed in the general direction of Fahd as she walked the short distance to him. When she arrived, she saw the shot didn't immediately kill him, much to her surprise.

She didn't know he was bleeding out internally since the round had nicked his heart. In her haste to make the shot and due to his baggy ghillie suit masking his natural form, she had not placed the crosshairs right over his heart. But it was close enough to incapacitate him. Getting closer, she contemplated firing a finishing shot, but didn't want to fire any more rounds than necessary and attract unwanted attention. She could have suppressed the shot, but remembered the AAC "can" was still in her pack. The only other weapon was the pistol holstered on her right leg. It wasn't suppressed either, but it had a special purpose in her mind.

She studied the face of the enemy sniper and even though dirty from the camouflage paint he wore, it was young like hers. She almost felt pity and remorse at the enemy that was slowly dying by her hand, but remembered this was a man who represented the entire IU. And in representing them, this was the man who killed her father. In a single moment, this wounded sniper before her became all she hated in the world, an entire nation packaged up in a single entity. The hat and bandanna suddenly became oppressive in that moment in time and she pulled them off with her non shooting hand.

Her eyes grew cold and a deep scowl came over her face as she dropped the rifle on its sling and slowly pulled the FNP-45 out of the holster at her thigh. It was her father's former pistol and now it would be used to avenge his death. She slowly raised the pistol towards his head and thumbed back the hammer one handed...

Fahd managed to move his head around and saw the enemy sniper walking over to him to confirm the kill. He could feel the precious life draining from his body and knew he didn't have the strength to pull his pistol and fire at the approaching individual. He wanted to hold on long

enough to come face to face with the man who had beaten him at his own game. He struggled to raise his head and was surprised at what he saw. His surprise grew further after the enemy removed her hat and cloth holding her hair back.

A woman! I've been killed by a woman! And even though her face is dirty, she is beautiful. Much too lovely to be out here on this hostile battlefield. He remembered hearing reports of the Americans using women in combat jobs, as the equals of men, including on their special forces teams. Fahd had thought it to be propaganda to make the Americans seem weak, but now saw this was entirely the case. This was the first time he had confirmation of their use in the special forces teams.

But maybe she isn't a soldier, maybe she is an angel coming to take me to paradise. Some different kind of armed angel taking me away since I have done my duty for Allah and He doesn't need me to kill any longer. That could possibly be the most foolish thing you have ever thought before in your life. Am I dead already? Is she an angel coming to take me away? No, I am still hurting. I am not dead yet. I have been killed by this beautiful woman. How ironic is the world? We have been taught to believe women to be inferior to men all our lives. And now? Now I see the foolishness of that sentiment. She was not only my equal, she was better than me.

He saw her drop her rifle onto its sling and remove the pistol from her drop holster slowly as a scowl came over her face. Her eyes were cold and piercing, almost like a physical weight on his face. He thought he could physically feel her stare deep inside his soul. He saw her slowly raising the pistol towards his head and thumb the hammer back. But he could not be afraid. There was no reason to be afraid. He always knew there was a chance of death each and every time he walked off the base on a mission. But now, he knew he was dying and there was nothing he could do that would stop his eventual death. The shot she would put between his eyes would only speed up the inevitable. He had survived long enough to come face to face with his killer and was happy in his death, even at the hands of a beautiful woman. As he started slipping away into the black abyss, he smiled at what he considered the most beautiful sight he had ever seen in his twenty-four years of life...

Nancy looked at the dying figure in front of her. And even though the hammer was cocked and her finger on the trigger, she could not bring herself to fire at him. She saw he was close to death as it was; the spots not covered in camouflage paint on his face were pale with the loss of blood. And the moment before he closed his eyes, he smiled and her and his head hit the ground. She slightly lowered the pistol and went forward to check his vitals. Feeling the carotid artery in his neck, there was no pulse. She stood there for a moment to reflect on what had just happened and wondered why the enemy sniper had smiled at her. She had seen death often enough through her telescopic sight, but this was the first time she had seen it up close and personal. It had not been what she had expected and she was a little shaken by it. But eventually she snapped back to reality and remembered her wounded comrade in the woods.

She decocked, put the pistol back in her holster and pulled the rifle over her shoulder. Looking around, she picked up the AWM and pulled the old German issue P-8 pistol from the holster at his side. Knowing she didn't have a lot of time. She ran back to where Alexander laid. Taking the bolt from the rifle, she dropped the remainder and shoved the bolt into her cargo pocket. The pistol was far easier as she cleared it quickly and tossed the slide one way and the frame the other.

She collected the pack which had been covered by her ghillie suit. She also yanked on the 550 cord she had been using to pull it, using a tree as a ninety degree angle to drag it closer to the edge of the trees. It hadn't been easy to get it into place, but she had been sneaky about it and one of the jobs of a marksman was to be sneaky. Gathering up her things, she quickly ran over to Alexander. He wasn't much worse for the wear and the dressings were holding. It had probably been an armor piercing round the enemy had used since the wound was nice and neat for the most part. Knowing she had a good haul ahead of her, she asked him if he could walk.

"No, I told you this was the end for me and to save yourself. Did you get him?" he asked faintly.

"Yes, he is dead," said Nancy without emotion.

"Good, now save yourself and forget about me," said Alexander as he let his head drop to the ground.

"I told you, we don't leave anyone behind!" she grunted as she pulled on her pack and dumped the ghillie suit. She knew it was additional weight that would slow her down and they had about three kilometers to the landing zone. She hated to leave a perfectly good ghillie suit, but time was of the essence. Thomas and the rest of the team had gone in a different direction and doglegged back towards the zone in order to confuse any enemy that might be pursuing them. It also helped draw away forces from her and Alexander, which Thomas had envisioned when he first set off.

"I cannot walk and you must leave! If I die, at least I die fighting and on my native soil. I have done my duty for Germany," he said.

"Stop that nonsense! If I can get you back to the landing zone, we can have our medics work on you and possibly get you to a hospital," she said as she grabbed his rifle and stood it against a tree.

"I will die here. Leave me," he said.

"I'm not leaving! If you stay, I stay!" she said through clinched teeth. Checking her radio, she found the round that penetrated her pack had hit the communicator, destroying the unit. A lucky shot or not, she had no way of contacting the rest of the team and letting them know her situation.

"You are a stubborn one. You know that?" said Alexander as he attempted to sit up. The pain was too much.

“I have a pain killer, will that help?” she asked, ignoring the question. She knew she was stubborn and didn’t need anyone reminding her of that fact.

“Yes, anything will help,” he said.

Nancy removed the pain killer from her aid kit and punched the self injecting needle into his arm. She made sure everything went in before tossing the used item to the side and covering it with some leaves. She stooped over and grabbed him by the arm to help pick him up. “Now you just need to walk with me.”

“I will try,” he grunted and grabbed at the rifle next to the tree. If anything, it could be used as a makeshift cane.

“One step after another. It’s getting dark and we need to move,” she grunted as she took his full weight on her shoulder.

“I will only slow you down,” he protested.

“Do I need to say it one more time?” she asked in a quiet voice.

He looked at the determination in her eyes and knew she would stay behind until he was dead. And in doing so, it might make him responsible for her death as well if she was killed. Knowing better than to argue, he pointed to the northwest. “That way, about three kilometers.”

And the two set out across the Belgian woods, which had returned to the sounds of nature after the sound of death had gone.

“Initiate wideband sweeps and keep an eye on the horizon for the refueling point,” said the pilot of the CV-22 transport heading inland to pick up the team. He scanned over the instruments through his night vision and started his approach to the covert refueling site where fuel bladders had been dropped earlier. They were going in at last light and would make a quick refueling on the ground before pressing on.

“We should be within three miles or so...whoa, what’s that?” asked the copilot as he looked out at the horizon.

A greenish glow on the horizon blurred out the rest of the images in their night vision and nothing could be seen around it. The copilot increased the magnification on his night vision and switched on the onboard thermal camera and slaved it to his headset. The thermal image showed an extremely hot spot where they were supposed to land and various flashes around the area.

“I think our refueling point just got hit,” said the pilot.

“Yeah, looks like an ongoing firefight at that location as well,” said the copilot.

“I’m not even going to chance making a pass there to check things out. Fuel status?” asked the pilot.

“We’ve got enough to make it to the pickup zone, but not a whole lot of time to hang around,” said the copilot.

“Give me the stats,” said the pilot.

“Inbound and loiter time will be under six minutes at the location to ensure we have enough fuel remaining to make it back to an approved alternate base in the U.K. We can hang around another two minutes if we land at Dover,” said the copilot.

“That team on the ground better have their stuff together or else we are all going to be stuck on the mainland,” said the pilot.

“I think we can make it,” said the copilot.

“Atari, Guru Five, be advised, we are inbound for the refueling point, but it looks like there had been some trouble,” said the pilot over the secure STACOM radio.

“Guru Five, Atari; what kind of trouble?” asked the controller flying aboard the Texan E-11 AWACS.

“It appears the refuel point was hit by an attack. Fuel dump is burning at this time,” said the pilot.

“Roger Guru Five, state fuel remaining,” said the voice over the radio.

“Atari, Guru Five, be advised, loiter time is reduced to eight minutes with approved landing at Alternate Golf. Request aerial refueling support,” said the pilot.

“Negative on last request. Weather conditions and fighter activity make aerial refueling out of the question at this time,” said the controller.

“Copy last Atari, we will need authorization to land at Alternate Golf,” said the pilot.

“Roger Guru Five; go with that plan and we will secure authorization for a landing at Alternate Golf. Anything else?” asked the controller.

“Negative, just a couple of hundred pounds of fuel might be nice,” said the pilot.

“Copy last, Guru Five; keep us appraised,” said the controller.

“We are here,” whispered Erik as they peeked out of the woods into a large clearing. He had just received a briefing from the leader of the German resistance cell watching the landing zone.

“This is the designated landing zone?” asked Thomas.

“Yes, and supposedly the Belgian resistance are on the other side waiting for us to make contact. The other resistance guys said they haven’t seen anyone around since they have been here and the aircrew will be here in the next ten minutes. You believe in luck?” asked Erik.

“Nope, people just don’t get lucky. Snoopy, you are in charge until I get back. Cover me on the way out,” said Thomas.

“No can do boss. Let me go,” said Darren.

“Both of you can wait behind and I’ll go. I’m the junior ranking one anyway,” said Rick.

“Both of you can stop right there. My mission, my responsibility,” said Thomas.

“And our responsibility if you get hammered after walking fifteen feet. Let me do this,” said Rick reasonably.

Thomas weighed the option and looked at Darren. He just shrugged his shoulders, which was a non-verbal way of saying “sure, sounds decent.” But Thomas was still worried about Nancy and didn’t want to put any more of his team at risk if he didn’t have too. But he also knew he needed to lead the team and not put himself at additional risk by exposing himself in the middle of the field with Erik. But he also saw Erik planning to go and knew it was a leader’s responsibility to go.

“No, you two stay put. This is my responsibility,” said Thomas and held up his hand before Rick could get a word out. “And no arguing about it. Set your teams out in a defensive perimeter and get ready for anything.”

Silently they nodded and went about setting the teams up in a defensive perimeter. Some facing behind them and others facing inward to the landing zone. Turning to Erik, he made sure his carbine was ready for action. “Ready?”

“Just waiting on you,” said Erik as they walked out of the woods and into the clearing. The field wasn’t that large, maybe one hundred meters by three hundred meters. But plenty large enough for the CV-22 that was coming to get them. Thomas kept his carbine at the low ready, not pointing it, but ready to fire if he needed too. Erik carried his AKM similarly and walked alongside of Thomas, but not close enough that a single burst could get them both. They were

walking the field long ways and it took them close to a minute to cover the distance. Caution was the watchword on this walk.

Upon reaching the center, Erik pulled a cigarette lighter from his pocket and sparked it twice. The small flame appeared twice before he put it back in his pocket. Thomas had the night vision scope down over his right eye and saw three brief flares in the woods to their front. Suddenly three individuals came out of the woods and walked towards them. Thomas could see already the men were not dressed in IU uniforms and wore plain dark civilian clothing. But they all carried rifles across their chest.

It took them about the same time to get to the center and make contact with the two already waiting. However, none of the individuals spoke English or German and Erik had to get on in French with them, despite their Belgian accent. Thomas wished Nancy had been along since her second language was French. She would have been highly useful in this situation.

Erik and the unidentified Belgian man spoke briefly for a few moments before reaching out hands and shaking. He turned to Thomas and translated. "This is Andre, leader of the local resistance cells. Apparently they have more of a military makeup in this area and he might be considered a battalion commander. Although he insists you call him Andre."

Thomas reached out his hand towards the leader of the local Belgian resistance, but was embraced in a hug instead. Thomas got squeezed fairly hard before the man took his hand and started shaking it up and down. He went off in rapid fire French and Erik attempted to keep up with him. "He says he is grateful for any people helping to liberate his country from the Muslims and even though you have not attacked any target in Belgium, he knows of several teams that have. This is the first time he had ever had the opportunity to thank anyone for helping destroy the IU here. And he says anything you need to just ask. At least this is what I think he is saying."

"Anything huh?" laughed Thomas and added. "Tell him you are very welcome and we appreciate the resistance keeping the IU occupied here instead of trying for another invasion of England and Ireland."

Erik started to translate as the man let go of his hand and the other two joined in the shaking and hugging. Thomas was at a loss for words at the emotions being shown by the three men. Others came out and joined up in the middle and slightly surrounded Erik and Thomas. Hard slaps on the back and more handshakes were to be had and Thomas wondered just how much more his arm could take before coming off at the shoulder. A voice from behind them broke the minor welcome celebration.

"Everything okay boss?" asked Rick from behind with Scott, Albert and Markus. They all had their weapons at the low ready like Thomas and Erik had been when they came out.

"Just being congratulated on doing our jobs. Nothing serious," said Thomas.

And if by magic, the small crowd turned on the new unsuspecting Americans and started shaking their hands as well. Thomas welcomed the relief on his arm and started feeling better since the mission began. But he also remembered he still had one person unaccounted for and would have to wait. Thomas had heard Michael periodically try to contact her by radio, but had heard no response. But they still had time. The aircraft wasn't due in for another two hours and two kilometers in that time would be a piece of cake for her and Alexander.

"Andre says the area is clear for the most part. There might still be the remains of a platoon they hit earlier, but no more than ten or so," said Erik.

"Ten individuals with massed small arms are enough to take down the aircraft. Does he have people looking for them?" asked Thomas.

Erik translated the words into French and received a reply. "He says he has men out looking for them. They were last seen about an hour ago approximately five kilometers west of here."

"Let them know we have Alexander and Giggles out there as well. Be wary of friendlies," said Thomas.

Erik translated the request and Andre immediately sent runners to contact his forces in the area. Turning back, he spoke in French one more time.

"He says he has one hundred men in the woods around here and it is as safe as he can make it," said Erik.

"It's still not safe enough for my tastes. Ask him if he requires assistance," said Thomas.

Erik translated the question and got a head shaking side to side in response with the reply in French. "He says it is better for us to remain here. More people in the woods means more chances of someone stumbling onto each other and firing by mistake. He says you need to stay here and let them do their jobs."

"Understandable and I agree. We will sit tight for the moment. But I want to go ahead and start getting the beacons and IR lights ready to go for when the aircraft arrives," said Thomas.

Darren approached and got the attention of Thomas. "Last minute problems boss."

"What's up?" asked Thomas.

"Just got a message. The aircraft will be here in the next thirty to forty minutes," said Darren.

"What?" exclaimed Thomas.

"Apparently the refueling site was hit and they are on a direct approach. Plus the times were changed without us knowing it. The aircraft is already inbound," said Darren.

“What kind of a goat-” Thomas started but was interrupted by Erik.

“Problems?” he asked.

“Yeah, the aircraft is due in way ahead of schedule,” said Thomas.

“I will let Andre know so he can get his people ready. Do you want to put out your signals now?” asked Erik.

“Better now than later,” said Thomas.

“I agree. Better to have it ready in advance than scramble at the last minute,” said Darren who took Andre and Erik in tow and started explaining what the requests were. Thomas turned back to his team, but his thoughts were still on Nancy.

“I believe we are being followed,” whispered Alexander as they stopped to take a rest. They had covered approximately two kilometers before hearing voices speaking Arabic in the woods nearby.

“How many?” whispered Nancy.

“Normally they have at least a squad, maybe more with everything that has been going on,” wheezed Alexander, who clearly wasn’t doing well.

“So at least ten?” she asked.

“At least,” he whispered.

“I’m going to leave you right here and go take a peek. Stay right here and don’t shoot!” she ordered.

He saw her pull out the AAC suppressor and attach it to the end of her rifle. She also marked the spot on the GPS she carried on her wrist before moving out silently in the woods. She had on her NODs and the woods glowed an eerie green. She knew she had the laser aiming device on the front of her rifle which could help guide in her rounds provided she was close enough. And with the subsonic ammunition she reloaded into her rifle, the shots would be very quiet indeed.

The voices could be heard fairly clearly, but they were not heading in the direction of Alexander. But with him being hurt, they were making far more noise than she wanted. Plus their rate of advance was slowed and they would never make it to the site on time. She continued to look around the woods until she caught a glimpse of one of the IU soldiers with his back to her. She peered around to see if he was the “tail end Charlie” of the group or at the front or in the middle.

He wasn't last, but second to last. It was almost perfect. The group stopped and started talking in Arabic, much too loudly for the situation, and took a head count.

Nancy saw the leader point in the direction of the landing zone and motion with his hand. She could see them preparing to shift directions and start heading in the general direction of the landing zone. And one carried a small mobile IR and laser guided MANPADS, a SA-31 missile. It had a slant range of six kilometers and would kill their aircraft just as easily as a larger SAM. She knew it was already in a position to be a threat and would have to be dealt with prior to them leaving.

She took up her position behind a tree and saw the squad of IU soldiers set off. Only the leader had on night vision from what she could tell and he wasn't being very vigilant to his flanks.

Peering through her nods and steadying her rifle, she saw she was oblique to their path and could pick them off after they passed her position. But they would be coming fairly close to Alexander, which made it imperative she make all her shots count.

After the last individual passed by her, she started illuminating the last individual and saw the beam on his back. He was approximately thirty meters away when she pulled the trigger. The sound of the bolt cycling was almost louder than the shot itself and she saw the man was hit. She immediately moved to the next target and repeated the same shot, scoring another center mass hit. She wasn't worried about killing them right off, but more about making sure they were down for the moment. When she reached the third target and struck, they must have picked up on her shenanigans and alerted the rest.

She immediately went into rapid fire mode and started picking off targets as they appeared. The IU soldiers were unsure of where the fire was coming from since the suppressor also masked the muzzle flash of the weapon. She fired and hit another two before they started to bracket her location. They started to move towards her and take cover behind some trees before firing on her position. But she had the advantage of night vision and could see their moves. The leader had a set of night vision goggles on and could roughly see where she was at and directed his fire onto her location. He urged his men to fire on her and start sweeping to her flank.

Two IU soldiers went to her left and out of her field of vision while she was concentrating on firing at the leader who appeared to be directing them. She managed a snap shot at him before shifting her rifle once again to the most immediate threat on her right. She hit the leader in the shoulder, disabling his right arm but not killing him outright. The two soldiers were caught in some of the thick undergrowth and presented a sharp target in her night vision. The dot appeared once again and she fired another two shots before displacing to make a better shot and hopefully ruin the plan of the other two on her left flank.

The leader was attempting to pick up his rifle left handed and fire at her. She quickly made another shot, catching him in the chest with the round and saw him go down hard. She looked quickly to the other two on her left flank and tried to pick them out in the wooded area. She had no great desire to get flanked by the two and knew they were attempting to catch her in a crossfire.

But Alexander had planned on this and the two appeared to his front. He fired with his Hi-Power at both individuals and made hits on both. They fell about fifteen meters to his front and he fired another two shots into each from his position. The physical exertion had finally taken its toll on him and he slumped over, pistol falling to the ground.

Nancy continued her solo duel with the lone survivor of the IU squad. He had untangled himself from the briars and was checking to his front. He never saw the rifle pointed at his head from twenty meters away until it was all over. She checked the target one last time and saw everyone was down. The sounds of the gunfire from the woods faded away and no more movement was heard. Looking through her night vision, she went back to where Alexander was lying. Along the way she checked on the other IU soldiers and saw they were dead or dying. When she reached Alexander, she saw he was unconscious.

Major Haddad watched as the woman checked on the man slumped against a tree. He was dying; he knew it and felt it. But somehow he remained alive through the end of the firefight even with the hole in his chest. He watched in the darkness as the FNC soldier checked on the man. He tried to make his right hand move to draw the pistol on his belt, but couldn't find the strength. His shoulder was wrecked from her bullet and he didn't have the strength to roll off the top of the leather holster underneath him. His last thoughts were of his failure. His failing to predict the events at the communications bunker, the failure to track the team effectively and his failure to lead the men in battle. He took one last breath and hoped Allah would be merciful in his death.

Nancy tried to wake Alexander up by gently shaking him then slapping him in the face. But he was out cold. In a great effort and with strength she didn't know she had, she dropped the rifle on its sling and took him across her shoulders in a fireman's carry. "We don't leave anyone behind," she grunted to herself as she continued walking towards the landing zone nearby. She heard rotors in the distance and knew their aircraft had arrived. But with no way of communicating with the team, she knew she would have to rush to get there and she had no way of calling for help.

CHAPTER 22 – TO THE END

Date/Time: 20 March/1833

Location: Near Rodgen, Occupied Belgium

“That firefight was fairly close by,” said Thomas as the area grew darker and the last light faded away. The moon would not be up for some time.

“Andre has assured me the woods are clear of enemy for at least a kilometer out,” said Erik.

“Might want to check on that anyway,” said Thomas. He turned to check on his team when a person in a flight suit approached him. The aircrew had finally arrived.

“Howdy, I’m Major Shelly Wilson, 3rd Bomber Wing in the AFNAS and pilot of the former B-1 bomber known as the *Feisty Belle*. Guess I have to get a new plane now,” laughed the tall female pilot with the dirty face.

“Major Tom Dayfield, 14th Special Operations Battalion, North American Union Guards. You’re a long way from home,” he said as he took the offered hand. “What happened?”

“Got ourselves shot down by one of those new SAMs they came up with. The ones with the backup laser tracker. Held it together to get us this far and bailed out,” she said.

“Everyone make it out okay?” asked Thomas.

“Yeah, took us a while to gather everyone up when we hit the ground, but we eventually got underway. Were you the ones that sent the German resistance to find us?” asked Wilson.

“Yes, we were working with a group that heard about your plane going down. But I am thankful you were there, kind of. You guys diverted forces that otherwise would have been looking for us,” said Thomas.

“Nice to know we could help even without our plane,” she said with a smile, knowing rescue was that much closer. Her crew started mingling with the others waiting for the aircraft to arrive.

“You have an all female crew?” asked Thomas.

“Yeah, it was kind of a joke on the part of our squadron commander when we first formed up, but we kind of clicked afterwards and they kept us together, although we don’t play well with others. Hence the name of the plane,” she laughed, the first time in a while. “You have a few females as well I see.”

“Yeah, and we are waiting on one of them. She stayed behind to cover our withdrawal,” said Thomas.

“We are just waiting on her?” asked Wilson.

“Yes, we don’t leave anyone behind. If she isn’t here by the time the aircraft has to depart, we will stay behind and find her,” said Thomas.

“Pretty dedicated to your team,” observed Wilson.

“Keeps us alive. Most of us have been together since the Fall. More of a family than a team,” said Thomas.

“Are you guys the ones from North Carolina? The ones that were defending that hilltop with that conventional unit?” asked Wilson.

“The very same ones. But that was a lifetime ago,” said Thomas.

“Never thought I might meet a group of heroes in the middle of Germany,” she remarked.

“Nope, the real heroes are those guys,” said Thomas as he swept his hand at the gathered resistance fighters, both German and Belgian.

“I know a few folks that might argue with that remark,” said Wilson.

The rest of their conversation was interrupted by the communicator buzzing at Thomas. He synchronized the device with the incoming call and found out their transportation had arrived.

“Eris Red Five, this is Guru Five, we are inbound your location for extraction. How copy?” asked the pilot on the CV-22.

“I copy and am prepared to authenticate,” said Thomas.

“Eris Lead, I pass you Yankee Seven,” said the pilot.

“I pass you Quebec One Victor,” said Thomas.

“I copy last, we are three minutes out with one visual pass and flare for landing,” said the pilot.

“Copy last Guru Five. This caller is now identified as Warbucks. Be advised, winds out of the west at steady four knots, landing zone is illuminated with IR markers and laser beacons,” said Thomas.

“I copy, we have visual,” said the pilot.

“Get everyone headed this way,” said Thomas to Amber. “Any luck on getting Giggles on the radio?”

“No, we’ve all tried, but there isn’t an answer,” said Amber.

“Tell Token to keep trying,” said Thomas, worried about Nancy once again.

The CV-22 made a low pass over the clearing and rolled around in the sky quickly. It had come up rather suddenly from treetop level and transitioned from airplane to helicopter. It slowed rapidly as the craft came in for a landing right in the middle of the landing zone. The back ramp came down and the crew chief came off and greeted Thomas.

“We’ve only got about five minutes to spare! Get everyone loaded!” yelled the crew chief over the rotors.

Thomas put his hand over his head and gave the “rally up” signal to his team. Andre and Erik were still watching for any signs of IU presence as the team ran over with everything. Last minute goodbyes were said to the Germans as they passed by and small tokens of appreciating were handed over. The pilots didn’t have anything to pack away and were tossed aboard quickly and found seating in the front of the craft. With the four plus the team plus all the gear, it would become crowded fairly quickly.

Darren and Thomas were standing at the ramp counting their personnel as they entered the transport. Thomas accounted for his two teams, but Darren was still one short. Both men tossed their packs onto the craft and they were quickly stowed by the rest of the team.

“We ready to go?” asked the crew chief.

“No, we’ve got one more coming in,” said Thomas as they both scanned the nearby woods where they expected Nancy to appear from. They continued to try contacting her, but with no answer. The crew chief looked impatient as he held his MP7 at the ready and scanned along with them. The gunner’s stations on the aircraft were void of the typical machine guns and gunners that would have accompanied them since they were so far inland.

The crew chief plugged his headset back into the jack at the rear of the aircraft and let the pilot know they were waiting for one more person. The pilot looked at the fuel gauge, his watch, the navigation panel and back at the computer gauges. “We don’t have a lot of time to be wasting,” he relayed back to the crew chief.

“How long?” asked the crew chief to Thomas.

“Should be any second,” said Thomas, worrying.

Nancy could hear the rotors of the craft distinctly through the trees. But she didn’t know how far exactly she had to go. The weight of Alexander was digging into her shoulders, her legs starting

to weaken and her night vision had slipped off at some point. The branches and undergrowth grabbed at her in nature's way of slowing her progress and stopping her. But she had a clear goal in mind, to get to the aircraft. And she continued to put one foot in front of the other, heading towards the sound of the safety the aircraft provided.

"We've got to go! We are down to one minute of fuel and there's bad weather moving in over the Channel!" yelled the crew chief of the Osprey at Thomas.

"If you've got another minute, then by God, we stay here another minute! We don't leave anyone behind!" yelled Thomas as he continued to scan the horizon.

"Sir, we put this aircraft and everyone at risk if we stay any longer!" said the crew chief who knew there was probably more than a minute of fuel remaining. But the pilots were being cautious as they typically were this far behind enemy lines. And with the fuel drop being destroyed, this made things even tighter.

"You tell the pilot if she isn't here in the next minute to leave," yelled Thomas to the crew chief. The crew chief was about to relay the order over the intercom, but heard the pilot talking to their air cover.

"Guru Five, this is Scuba Lead. Be advised, fighter activity to the northeast. We have been dispatched by Atari to intercept," said the lead pilot of the four F-20C aircraft currently orbiting over their location and providing fighter cover. His British accent was a true testimony to the combined operations of this mission. A NAU ground team being airlifted by a United States CV-22 being covered by UK fighters being controlled by a Texan AWACS aircraft and the entire coordination going through AFNAS satellites to a NESAC Command Center. It was almost confusing.

"I copy Scuba Lead," said the pilot of the CV-22.

"If you need air cover, we have additional flights coming in from England," said the lead pilot.

"Copy that, good hunting," said the pilot of the CV-22 as he checked his remaining fuel for the hundredth time since being on the ground. It was getting too close for comfort. "We have got to leave now," he relayed over the intercom to the crew chief.

"Pilot says we have to go!" said the crew chief to Thomas.

"Take the rest of the team and go! I'll stay behind and get her and arrange for another pick up," yelled Thomas to Darren over the whirling blades of the engines.

“You are not staying behind by yourself!” yelled Darren in protest and started to gather his gear along with almost everyone else. He tossed both the packs off the ramp and was quickly followed by the remainder of the team, preparing weapons and equipment to stay a little longer. The emergency rations on the aircraft were located and quickly broken into. The team would need everything they could haul since resupply and ex-fil might take a little longer than planned.

“Wait!” yelled Erik as he pointed at the small copse of woods to their immediate south. A figure emerged from the woods and could be seen carrying another. They ran the short distance and helped Nancy get Alexander off her shoulders.

“He’s hit pretty badly! I managed to slap on a bandage but he needs medical treatment!” she yelled over the engines.

Scott immediately set to work checking out her handiwork but was stopped by Erik and the Belgian resistance member, Andre. “No, we will take care of him. You need to leave!”

“We can help!” yelled Scott.

“We might have a doctor nearby that can help!” yelled Erik.

“We can ensure his survival if we take him with us,” said Scott.

Andre said something in French to Erik and shook his head. Nancy interrupted and spoke in French to him and received a nod from Andre and Erik.

“He says there isn’t a doctor nearby. I told him we would take him with us and get him back when he was better,” said Nancy, grabbing Alexander’s arm and starting to pull him up. Two others took her place and grabbed him in a fore and aft carry to the waiting transport with Scott in tow already grabbing medical supplies out of his bag.

Thomas and Darren took one final moment to shake the Erik’s hand before leaving. “We will meet again.”

“God willing. Thank you for your help,” said Erik as the Belgian resistance leader also shook their hands.

“Keep fighting and we will come back, I swear this to you,” said Thomas as he departed for the aircraft, rapidly filling up again.

Their packs had already been thrown aboard by the rest of the team and Nancy was helped on the ramp. The crew chief grabbed at both their hands and pulled them onto the ramp. The second their feet touched the metal, the pilot roared the engines and pulled off the ground. Thomas and Darren found an empty seat and plopped down. “What happened?” asked Thomas to Nancy.

“Ran into a little trouble with that sniper and another squad setting up to ambush the aircraft,” she said, feeling extremely tired now, but alert at the same time. She didn’t think it was a big deal. “Dad helped me out.”

“What was that?” asked Darren.

“I said Dad helped me out. I don’t know how, but I think he was there with me the whole time,” she said, starting to crash after the adrenaline rush.

“You okay?” asked Michael who had come over to sit next to her.

“Yes, just tired,” she said, sitting back and reflecting on what happened. *Thank you Daddy.*

After she had buckled in, she immediately fell asleep. Thomas and Michael picked up her patrol pack from her feet to stow it properly. They noticed the bullet hole in the top and bottom for the first time.

“Looks like she took a near miss,” remarked Thomas.

“Way too close for comfort there. Four inches lower and it would have been her head,” said Michael, not knowing the pack was nowhere near her when the bullet struck it.

“She’s safe now, that’s all that matters,” said Thomas, feeling quite tired himself.

“This is going to make an interesting chapter in my book. Providing we live long enough for me to get it published,” grinned Michael who continued to write the “great American novel” in his free time.

Scott was poking and prodding at Alexander, patching what he could as they bumped along on the flight. He was being assisted by Rick and Martin and started an IV to replenish the fluids he had lost on the journey out. Nancy had done a good job of keeping him alive so far and they had little to do except wait to get him into a hospital.

“She is a hero,” said Alexander weakly after waking up in the unfamiliar environment, but seeing he was among friends.

“What’s that?” asked Rick.

“She is a hero...killed the enemy sniper...took out a squad by herself...carried me here...she is a brave woman,” he said in gasping breaths.

“You rest easy, we’re going to get you to a hospital,” said Scott as he checked the IV.

In the front of the aircraft the pilot and copilot were completely oblivious to the team in the back. They had already spent more time on the ground and burned off precious fuel. “I don’t know if we are going to make it.”

“We’ve got enough fuel to make it over the Channel. But other than that, we probably won’t make it to dry land,” said the copilot. “Refueling support?”

“No, they can’t make it out in the storm. Go ahead and alert search and rescue and give our projected course anyway. Let our passengers know we might not make it,” said the pilot over the intercom.

“We might not make it back to England. We burned off too much fuel in Belgium,” said the crew chief.

“What do you need us to do?” asked Thomas.

“Get ready to shed all your equipment. If we get a water landing, you don’t want anything weighing you down,” said the crew chief.

“What about our equipment? We can dump it over the Channel and free up some weight,” said Michael.

The crew chief relayed the request up to the pilot, who stated no, that wouldn’t help with the fuel remaining as it might only add another ten seconds onto their flight time. But they did shed everything off their bodies that would weigh them down in the water. Even their pockets were emptied of the contents and prepared for a controlled landing in the fierce weather the English Channel was known for. Nancy had forgotten about the AWM bolt since she hadn’t had the time to dump it along the way and found it as she cleared out her pockets. Not knowing what to do with it, she dropped it back into her pocket and would figure it out when they got back to base. It would add a little weight, but she was a good swimmer and for some reason, she felt the need to keep the bolt of that particular rifle. The ride suddenly got bumpy as the aircraft entered the edge of the storm and attempted to gain further altitude.

“Not going to be an easy ride,” said the copilot.

“It never is,” said the pilot as he concentrated on the gauges, fuel remaining and keeping the aircraft in the sky. Eventually they made it out over the Channel and started praying. “Atari, Guru Five, be advised, feet wet at this time.”

“Roger, Guru Five, this is Saturn Base. Be advised we will be your controller until touchdown. Atari will still be on this net for support. State fuel remaining,” said the Colonel waiting in the operations center at RAF Mildenhall.

“Roger Saturn Base; be advised, projected course puts us about five miles from the coast near Dover,” said the pilot.

“Copy last. SAR is being alerted and will be on standby for you,” said the Colonel, anxiously waiting for one of his teams to return.

“Know any good prayers that turn air into fuel?” asked the copilot as the aircraft was bounced around in the winds.

“Projected course?” asked the pilot.

“About three miles from the coast now,” said the copilot as he relayed that tidbit of information to the command center.

“We will be about three miles off the coast when we go down. Search and rescue has been notified and will be enroute as soon as we touch down,” yelled the crew chief to the gathered team. “Stick together once we go in, it will make their job easier to find us.”

Each and every one of the member in the cargo area started praying and hoped the pilots were skilled enough to land the aircraft without incident.

“Fuel remaining?” asked the pilot.

“Still the same. Maybe shortened up a bit. We should start our descent soon,” said the copilot.

Suddenly the aircraft went into clear skies and the lift of the wings took it up higher than it was before. “Check the radar!” ordered the pilot.

“Weather is clear for the next few miles. We get enough altitude and we might make it closer to the coast,” said the copilot.

“Got it,” said the pilot as he started climbing the aircraft in order to gain some distance on their glide path. The problem was the Osprey wasn’t that good of a glider. He traded altitude for speed, but not wasting any more fuel that necessary. “Radio our new projected course to Saturn.”

The copilot radioed in the new course and their projected landing spot. “Cutting it fairly close.”

“Closer to land, the better chance of them getting to us,” said the pilot, continuing to watch the horizon for the weather.

And the aircraft proceeded towards the English mainland, the skilled pilots keeping it in the air and gaining precious distance with each and every passing second. Alarms were turned off declaring the low fuel state to the crew. They knew exactly how much fuel remained since they checked it every other second. “Going to be tight,” said the pilot.

“Yeah,” said the copilot as the white cliffs of Dover came into view through the night vision.

“We can do this!” said the pilot as he started descending towards dry land.

“Engine two just ran out of fuel!” exclaimed the copilot as red lights flashed angrily at him.

“Initiate crossover mode!” yelled the pilot unnecessarily as the copilot had already started doing so. They had precious seconds left to reach the beach.

“Starting transition to helo mode,” said the copilot as the aircraft started to slow and the tilt rotors were going from forward propulsion to vertical flight. “We need to get down soon, we are running on fumes!”

“We are going to do this!” yelled the pilot as he picked up speed towards the shore by nosing the aircraft over.

“Coming in fast. Prepare for a hard landing!” exclaimed the copilot over the intercom.

The crew chief yelled at the team and told them to assume crash positions before taking an open seat himself and buckling in. At the front of the aircraft, the pilots did everything within their power to include praying to keep the plane airborne long enough to get onto the beach. “It’s tight!”

The Osprey came in over the beach just as the fuel ran out for the final engine. The rotors started winding down as the plane dropped the last ten feet and crunched into the soft sand at the edge of the beach. “Saturn Base, this is Guru Five. Be advised, feet dry at this time on the beach at Dover. We need immediate ambulance support for one critical casualty at this location. Also request refueling truck and a change of underwear is sent out to the following coordinates,” said the pilot as he started switching off his systems with a great exhale.

EPILOGUE – BRAVERY NEVER GOES OUT OF FASHION

Date/Time: 30 March/1649

Location: RAF Bassingbourn, Cambridgeshire County, Great Britain

“...citation to accompany the award of the Distinguished Service Cross is awarded to Sergeant Nancy Dugger, 14th Special Operations Battalion, 1st Brigade, 2nd North American Union Freedom Guards Division. For gallantry and valor in action and in the face of harsh opposition, Sergeant Dugger distinguished herself by placing her own safety at risk while engaging an enemy sniper following the team on a mission in Occupied Germany. During this event, she additionally was responsible for keeping an entire platoon of enemy soldiers at bay, allowing her team the opportunity to make escape plans and continue to the pickup point without being detected. Furthermore, Sergeant Dugger carried a wounded resistance member to the rally point, providing medical care and saving his life along the way all while fighting a delaying action against another IU squad. The distinctive accomplishments of Sergeant Dugger reflect great credit upon herself, the 14th Special Operations Battalion and the North American Union Armed Forces,” said the Field Marshal in charge of the forward forces of the North American Union. Pinning the medal on her uniform tunic and receiving a snappy salute, they turned to the camera for posterity sake with the citation. It wasn’t the first Distinguished Service Cross he had handed out, but it certainly was more unusual than most since she had a recent loss of a close family member.

The gathered military press was going slightly nuts trying to get a picture of the ceremony, although she shied away from giving interviews, much to their chagrin. Here they had a young, pretty and brave example to write about with a good head on her shoulders and one who looked past her losses to get the job done and she wasn’t playing ball. They had approached her team leader and commander to attempt to get them to sway her opinion and were told to leave her alone “or else.” They had to be content with pictures and the approved release from the unit public affairs monitor for the time being.

“Additionally, by order of the Governor of the Sovereign Republic of Colorado, Sergeant Dugger is hereby promoted to the grade of Staff Sergeant in the North American Union Freedom Guards, effective immediately,” said the Field Marshal as he pulled the new pins for her rank out of his pocket and pulled the old ones off her collar. She blushed up as she did not think it was a big deal and certainly not enough to justify the decoration and promotion. But Thomas, Darren, Rick and Michael had quietly pushed the issue when they got back and had the award written and signed in record time. With Alexander’s testimony on record from the hospital, it was all but guaranteed she would receive an award of some kind. He attempted to come to the ceremony, but the hospital staff had him under heavy watch after they caught him out of his bed near the hospital entrance trying to leave.

“Staff Sergeant Dugger, we owe you tremendous gratitude for volunteering for this mission in spite of your recent loss. Please accept my condolences to you and your family. I met your

father once and he left quite the impression on me. He was a true warrior and was spoken very highly of by all who met him,” said the Field Marshal.

“Thank you sir,” she said as she snapped up another salute and went off to be congratulated by her teammates and her family. Jill was up first and shook her sister’s hand before grabbing her into a hug. After the embrace, Nancy was swept into her mother’s arms and practically strangled by the hug she was given. Candy Dugger looked back eventually with tears in her eyes, but a smile on her face.

“Oh Mom, it’s not a big deal,” said Nancy with a straight face.

“It is a big deal! My baby is a hero!” exclaimed Candy.

“I just did my job,” said Nancy.

“That’s what your father always said,” said Candy.

Nancy looked at her Mother and saw her smiling at the announcement. While there was still pain in the loss of Mike Dugger, she was very proud of her daughter right then. But Nancy still wasn’t there. “I did it for him,” said Nancy.

“I know...and he knows. He’s watching you with pride right now. Proud of the woman you’ve grown up to be, the soldier you’ve become and how brave you were out there. I know your father is looking down and smiling at you with pride right now,” said Candy.

“I miss him so much Momma. I was scared but I think he helped me through the whole thing,” said Nancy getting slightly teary eyed herself.

“And he probably did. He never let anything happen to you while he was alive and I doubt he’s going to stop now,” said Candy with a smile and saw the burden her daughter had carried since that fateful day Mike had died. “You can let go now. He understands what you did and would probably want you to let it go. He always loved to hear you laugh and to see you smile.”

Nancy took a moment to think about what her Mother just said. And in thinking, she was right; as she typically was. Nancy had half a smile come across her face without even thinking about it and it grew to a full smile before she even knew it. And Candy shed one more tear as her daughter had returned once again. It would still take time to get over it fully, but she had started the healing process.

“You go on over there and let them congratulate you as well, baby,” said Candy.

“Momma, I’m not a baby anymore,” said Nancy with a smile.

“You’ll always be my baby,” said Candy and received another smile, a laugh and a roll of eyes in return. They hugged once again, mother and daughter united in a land far from home and in conditions far from normal.

The Field Marshal gravitated over to Thomas who watched proudly outside the group as Nancy went over to her team and started smiling once again. Greg put in his typical cigar before lighting it up, much to the irritation of nearby Amy, who gave him down the road any time he attempted to smoke the cigars. She tolerated it only because it was only after successful missions but still gave him the look of disapproval. The typical gruff Greg went immediately into wounded puppy look and knew he was in trouble. Nancy saw the whole thing going on and went into one of her customary giggle fits once again. Thomas hadn't seen her smile, much less laugh, since the day her father died and was glad she was getting slightly back to normal. She had exorcised her demons on the mission and hopefully her life was back on track now.

Four pilots came over wearing non-standard digital woodland flight suits and went up to the team members. They identified themselves as Ruffle Flight and introduced each other and reminded the team they had to make good on the offer of a free drink. They too had received decorations, Distinguished Flying Crosses each, from the mission as Thomas had pushed for that one behind the scenes as well. Their ceremony had taken place at their home base of RAF Honington, but they had gotten permission to race over to Bassingbourn to watch the ceremony they were invited to. They typically did their jobs and never looked back, but Thomas had sent a message to their command insisting the pilots to be a part of the ceremony and they gladly accepted. Also on site were the crews of the C-130J and the CV-22. The four groups mingled together and Nancy had a good time laughing at everyone's comments.

A surprise visitor walked up and needed no introduction to the teams. Jarvis Werner was thanked once again for his contributions to the missions and they were happy he was able to make it to the ceremony. Nancy bounced over, still feeling the elation of the moment and gave him a large hug before being lifted off the ground by the towering Jarvis with her laughing the whole way. She gave him a quick peck on the lips for his efforts and laughed as the proper German blushed up and set her down, but with a smile himself. It was the typical carefree Nancy they all knew and loved and everyone saw "Giggles" was returning in full force.

"She's a firecracker isn't she?" asked the Field Marshal as he had watched in silence behind Thomas.

"That she is sir. I almost made her stay behind, but her mother said she was stubborn enough to make it through," said Thomas.

"Probably a good thing you didn't leave her behind. Her tenacity seemed to be critical on your mission," said the Field Marshal.

"That it was sir. Heading back to London tonight?" asked Thomas. London, even after the nuclear attack, had bounced back in typical form and was rapidly being rebuilt. IU efforts to bomb and rocket the city caused damage much like it had in the last war, but it just put steel into the resolve of the British people once again.

"No, I've got an inspection to conduct tomorrow morning at another base nearby. I'll be spending the night and heading out first thing in the morning," said the Field Marshal. He

continued watching the scene thoughtfully before making an astute observation. “With everything you went through, Eris was the perfect name for your mission.”

“Ancient Greek goddess of strife and discord. We certainly went through enough of it,” said Thomas.

“And gave just as much or more back to the IU. Their communications system has broken down almost entirely in the western theater. Plus with the ongoing resistance activities in the area, the logistical system of the IU has been set back a good ways,” said the Field Marshall.

“At the cost of Mike Dugger,” said Thomas, remembering what the cost of the mission was. Plus, there would be recovery time for Nate Clark and Greg Henry. But their wounds would heal and they would be ready in time for the invasion. They planned to forge the note from the doctor clearing them medically if needed just to move out with their team and their family.

“He was a good man. I never really knew him all that well, but everyone I know thought highly of him,” said the Field Marshall thoughtfully.

“One of the best,” said Thomas quietly. He had reflected on the loss of Mike after the mission and come to the deduction it was the way Mike probably wanted to go out, fighting for liberty even far away from home.

The two silently watched as Nancy and the rest of the team made their plans to go to the tavern in the local town. The now larger group agreed on it and planned to go as one massed group after dinner at their barracks. Apparently, someone had secured steaks, potatoes and some other fresh veggies grown in a greenhouse from a local farmer and plans were made to have a barbeque instead of eating at the chow hall. Stephen was already getting the fire ready and with the help of Stu had already butchered up the meat. They had more than enough to go around and nobody was going to tell the aircrews which helped their teammates and family escape from behind the lines they couldn’t be there.

“Care to join us for dinner and a celebration beer at our local pub afterwards?” asked Thomas as he changed the subject. The Colonel who was Aide de Camp to the Field Marshal behind the both of them dropped his mouth wide open at the question. Field Marshals were not supposed to be offered a beer by anyone except another Field Marshal; maybe a General was okay, but certainly not a Major. It just wasn’t proper. But nobody ever told Thomas to be politically correct.

“I shouldn’t be drinking with the troops, but if I buy it and leave it on the table where she happens to be sitting, it really isn’t drinking with the troops. I’d like the opportunity to buy that young hero a beer,” said the Field Marshal with a smile.

“She doesn’t drink that much, but she will probably oblige in this situation. It isn’t every day you get a beer bought by a Field Marshal,” laughed Thomas.

“And what’s next for your team?” asked the Field Marshal as they started stepping away from the group and towards the barracks.

“Next? Next we get ready to jump into France before the main invasion. Operation Phoenix is our next stop,” answered Thomas, looking at the horizon as if it held the secret to what happened next.

Afterthoughts on “Tales of the Ranch – Operation Eris” by the author

I deliberately left “Normal” open in the end with a span of 37 years in order to fill in some of the blank spots left between the last chapter and the epilogue. I did this in case I got creative and wanted to write a few short(er) stories to fill in the gaps. As obviously is the case, I got creative once again with the gang from the Ranch. Since I’m in Germany when writing this, I figured it would be best to do so while I can observe the ground view for myself and actually look at the terrain I’m writing about. While the communications site is fictitious, the area in which it’s as is not. Additionally, this area was a major staging ground for the Battle of the Bulge during World War II and there are still several bunkers and tunnels in the hills around the area. The Germans in this area dug them to conceal military equipment, supplies and to use as bomb shelters. So the tunnels and underground network are not entirely inaccurate as I have seen some of these tunnels with my own eyes. Each and every other place in the story is real.

The story was originally competing with “Key to Paradise” as I was writing both at the same time, but “TOTR” took the edge as it was developed more when I started them both and was easier to complete when it came down to it. Not to say I won’t finish “Key to Paradise,” but I needed to focus on one story instead of trying to switch my mindsets between the two. So “TOTR” got the nod as the primary story I was writing about. However, with events in Haiti still unfolding, “Key to Paradise” is on indefinite hold for now. Eventually, but not at this moment.

And also “Solitary” kind of got in the way as well as I started another new story. I just can’t seem to control myself. But I figured I would finish this up before getting too heavy and deep into the other. Well, I’m already heavy and deep into the other, but had the majority of the work done on this one. Plus a few more “Tales” tales are coming along with thoughts here and there, minor parts and other stuff. Yeah, I keep myself pretty busy bouncing between stories.

But also, along the way, life happened to me and I was unable to focus on the story there for a time. Oh, I would hack away at it here and there, but I just had no energy to complete anything at that point in time. But eventually, I was able to reach down deep inside and pull myself back up to where I needed to be. And I finally got back on track in my life and finished this up.

The characters, again, are figments of my imagination, but resemble some people I know. Some of the traits of the local Germans who work with the Air Force were used, but again, certain traits and nothing more. The remainder of the individuals in the story you might know about from reading “Normal.”

As always, many thanks to the readers, the moderators and those who helped out with the making of “Tales of the Ranch – Operation Eris.” Without you following up and continuing to read, I would probably give it all up and go home. It always gives me inspiration to write more when I see the stories being received so well. So a special thanks to the readers out there who continued to put up with my cliffhangers at the end of every chapter and waited until I got my own life back on track and started writing again. It took a while, but I finally got it done.

Thanks to Anvil, Fanderal and Fleataxi for moderating the Fiction Forum of Frugals and for letting me bounce ideas off them from time to time while it was still open. They assisted me while I was posting this and I still owe them thanks for assisting when I needed it. Since the posting of this story, the fiction section of that website has been pulled and thankfully there are other forum owners out there more than willing to let us fledgling authors continue to post our stories. I send a heartfelt thanks for you continuing to provide an area for us to put our works so we can share them with the public.

Additional thanks to Melbo and the crew at Survival Monkey for finding a new home for “Tales.” I appreciate the time Melbo took in assisting me with originally posting my stories and the patience he took with my Neanderthal approach to computers.

Thanks also go out to cowboy7242001, Feral, TomJefferson and Waldo for keeping up the Survival Fiction portion of ARFCOM. As well as the other mods, supermods and computer geeks that keep the site up and running as well. I owe them a “shout out” for assisting when I first put it out there, although the story is no longer available at ARFCOM.

Special thanks go out to Sebastian and Simone B from Trier, Germany for their continual translation of my horrid German and ensuring it was grammatically and conversationally correct. It’s one thing to translate on one of the many internet sites set up for translation and another to have a member of that nation who actually speaks that language backing it up. I almost gave up on Google Translate out of frustration as they kept reminding me nothing was literal in translation and “yes, you can speak that way, but people will look at you really funny if you talked the way the internet translates for you.” I appreciate all the time they took to provide the *Deutsch* to English and vice versa necessary for the story. So a huge thank you for their services in translating the different parts of the story into German which could be understood by those fluent in the language.

And again, thanks go out to cpaspr at ARFCOM for his continued services as an unpaid editor and checking my work. I know I keep him pretty busy with my abysmal typing skills, but through it all he never complained and continued to send me regular updates on major face palm errors in the story I know I should have picked up on from the start.

This one was a little darker than what I am used to writing, mainly with killing off a major character from the get go, but this is life. Tragedy happens and we are forced to deal with it. Sometimes we are forced to look past it to the greater scheme of things. Soldiers the world around often have to look past the death of comrades and friends and continue on with the mission. We (as Americans) have been doing it for two hundred plus years and will probably continue to do so in the future. So even as dark as this one might have been, it is reality based. Without the selfless service of the armed forces in continuing to perform in the face of great adversity, we would have been destroyed as a nation long ago. A great debt of gratitude is owed to the service of millions that have preserved our nation for so long and will continue in the future.

All in all, I don’t consider this a teaching story in any way, but more of an entertaining one. “Normal” was a little bit of a teaching story as was “By Law.” Maybe too gear happy in

“Normal” and to romantic in “By Law,” but this was the first story I did just for my own satisfaction. No great lessons to be learned here that I am aware of, but just entertainment for the reader. Maybe there is a minor tidbit here and there to learn, but I never wrote it for more than anything besides “I wanted to write it.” And I can only hope you all were entertained while reading it.

Grand58742

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