

Gordon 1 -- Xepon

The Phantom's nose was already below the horizon when that the flak began.

"You idiot," Gordon spoke absently into the intercom, "stand by for a ram." He was still several seconds away from rolling wings-level on final track, yet the guns were already firing, rippling the blackness with speckles of light. Viewed from the side, tracers appear as a visual stream of Morse code, but nose-on it's a different story. They grow from pin-pricks to glowing globs of streaking fire, bobbing and dancing against a murky canvas. As long as you can see some motion, you're all right, but the moment the globes steady up, it means that you're on a collision course . . . and that's what Gordon saw at this moment. Not that he hadn't seen it before -- it happened every night here at Xepon -- but being hosed down with flak is something you don't quite get used to, and Gordon felt his bowels constrict, as if by doing so they could get out of the way.

"420. two-thou to go." Rick Firestone, Gordon's Radar Intercept Officer in the rear cockpit kept his eyes glued to the wildly spinning instruments as the Phantom slashed through the moonless sky seeking that exact point above the ground from which to sling its bombs against the truck park. Xepon is the crossroads of Route 9A and 3 -- mainlines of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

"Che-PONE. Che-PONE, di DA di di DA DA . . . DA di DA . . . Che-PONE. Che-PONE . . ." the ridiculous refrain droned mindlessly on, occasionally emerging on Gordon's tongue to paint itself into the backdrop of heavy breathing on the intercom.

Though the projectiles and the plane were closing at over two thousand feet per second, their meeting seemed to take forever. Since the start of the run, the plane had been banked up over 90 degrees, allowing the nose to carve its way down until it reached the point where for every foot forward it plunged a foot down. Just as he wrenched the plane back to wings-level with his gunsight pipper spiked on the target -- half a second short of release -- the balls of light bobbed once . . . then twice and then ripped apart, diverging to either side of the canopy in staccato streaks. But to Gordon, intent on piercing the darkness for the hint of metal or glass, there was only the pipper, livid and adrift in the void.

"450, standby."

In the searing flash of lightning above the Assam range, the world leaped out of the darkness in a momentary tableau. Hills . . . gullies . . . roadbed . . . pockmarks . . . and the jungle . . . all in a gray-blue monochrome, drawn together in an instant of insane destiny before being cast again into oblivion.

"Standby!"

A last flick to correct for a slight drift . . . a pause . . .

"MARK!"

The Phantom shimmied slightly as a train of six bombs rippled from the centerline rack, and Gordon brought the stick back smoothly, coaxing the twenty ton monster back into the upper air.

"One more run and we can head for the barn," he sighed, and then it happened.

It started with a mild "thump" just as the nose carved its way though the horizon, and for an instant that was all. Gordon had no sooner begun to grapple with the possibility that his overstressed sensitivities had hallucinated, than there was heavy rumble and flash.

Immediately the telelight panel went berserk, its madness punctuated by the pulsing red flashes of the fire warning lights in the center of the dash. As quickly as they had come on, the lights went out. The cockpit was pitch black, while outside, the airplane's guts spilled a roaring swath of molten gore into the ashen sky.

Instinctively he reached for the RAT handle to deploy the emergency air-driven generator, but before he could reach it, the control stick went slack in his hand. The plane was finished, and in one continuous motion, Gordon released the stick and grasped the lower ejection handle on the front of the seat between his knees. Pulling sharply up, he heaved back into the seat, burrowing his helmet into the headrest. There was an immediate blast of air as the rear canopy separated, followed by a loud report. Firestone vanished on a pillar of flame, leaving Gordon alone in the dying shambles of what until the moment before had been man's miracle of aluminum, titanium, boron filament and transistor chip -- his supreme oblation to the masters of eternity.

"I'm ready, goddamn it," he yelled into the ripping slipstream, as if the act could bypass the one-second seat sequencing delay. Gordon grew ancient in that mechanically contrived eternity,

captive to the incredible realization that time was about to run out . . . and it almost did. There was a blinding flash and he was cast tumbling into a yawning black vortex. What a stupid way to die, you shithead, he surmised contemptuously, as a man whose perspective was now one with the ages. With a conscious will, he mustered his forces greet oblivion with a warrior's dignity, a posture that was humiliatingly stripped from him in the painful snap the parachute opening-shock. He compressed deeply into the webbing of his torso harness, where now he found himself faced with the absurdity of recovering both his wits and breath.

What do I do now?, he wondered in a semi Panic. There's something I should be doing. What is it? He tried to clear his mind -- get himself on track. Struggling to bring himself back to the present, he strained to visualize the emergency procedures. Withdraw the lanyard from the seatpack. The words formed before his eyes. Yes, yes, I know, but which side? He tore frantically at the fabric, but with the gloves on, he could feel nothing. The ejection had slammed his tinted visor down, so that what little visibility he might otherwise have had in the darkness was reduced to nil. Unable to see, he sensed the ground coming up rapidly. At last he found the snap-ring.

Attach the lanyard to the torso harness and release the . . . It was too late. He felt something lightly brush his leg, followed by a slight tug on the risers as the chute snagged the upper branches of the tree. He dashed soundly against the trunk once . . . twice, then more gently, coming to rest twenty feet above the ground. For a moment, there was silence as he swung rhythmically back and forth in the darkness. He snapped the visor up and it was lighter, but still he was unable to make out his surroundings. Then without warning, the branch snapped, sending him crashing to the ground.

He was warm and safe in his own little bed. There was Barky, his stuffed dog, and clutching his soft fur tightly, he snuggled down under the warm covers. He was just eight, and while there were dragons and demons outside in the moaning wind that held the hint of rain, Gordon was safe, protected by his mother's magic hug administered just before she tucked him in and closed his door. But gradually the scene began to skew, and he was adrift among the covers. He tried to make his way out to where his pillow was, but instead he found himself burrowing up against the

foot of the bed. He turned around only to be confronted with another dead end. Again, and yet again he tried, but every time the result was the same. He was suffocating. He wanted his mother. All he had to do was call, and she'd come and gather him into her arms and hold him until the spell was once again complete.

"That's it! I'll call her and it'll be all right." he said aloud while his mind raced feverishly through the creaking wood-planked hallway and through the sliding doorway to his parents' bedroom. Will they be in bed? and he glimpsed a movement beneath the satin comforter. "Are you asleep?" he asked fearfully lest he awaken in them wrath. "Can you hear me?," and this time the scene distorted further.

It will be easier for them to hear me when I get this goddamned oxygen mask off. He struggled with the bayonet fitting, but something was binding it tight. He felt tiny fingers of panic clutch at his throat. Breathing was becoming more difficult by the moment. "Mom! . . . Pop!," he said in a high whisper, but he knew that they couldn't hear him. Mom can't hear me until I get this blasted thing loose, he observed in an aside, but even as that realization took hold, the manic scene dissembled again, and he felt this new thing -- this himself -- emerging at a horrendous rate. Sensations from every fiber of his body welled up in a mighty rush, as if seeking to extrude themselves through each pore. Suddenly he was very frightened. Suddenly he couldn't breathe at all.

Even before he placed his present situation, he realized that he had exhausted his emergency oxygen, and this time when he tore at his mask, the fittings released. My god! It's really happened. I've been shot down, he recalled in a wrenching panic. I'm on the ground in indian territory. visions of the dark forest with its winking guns and thundering bomb blasts drifted in front of him. I might be hurt . . I might be captured . . . What'll I do if I get captured?

Images of unspeakable terror tore through him in little pulsing waves of nausea. He wanted to vomit. His ravaged body ached in a thousand places, and he wanted to sleep. But mostly he wanted to turn back the clock to what was even now little more than an hour ago when he could have grounded his aircraft for any of a dozen good and sufficient reasons, and retired to his tent for the evening. Doc Turner, the flight surgeon would be there, making horrible noises on that

horrible guitar while he sang in whatever key happened to get in his way. God, if you get me out of this, I'll never bitch about him again.

Then he heard them. There were several people clipping through the undergrowth close enough for Gordon to hear their labored breathing. They stopped momentarily to listen, and Gordon felt a tickle growing in his throat. But they moved on. A little farther off, he heard the shouts of another search party, and knew that sooner or later they'd find him if he stayed where he was.

It took several minutes to clear himself of his parachute and shroudlines. He was wrapped and tangled in a dozen different ways, so that everything he did seemed to bind him more completely. His head grew light in the exertion, and he hyperventilated until he recognized the symptoms and lay back to relax. Eventually, he had to resort to his survival knife with the hook-like blade which had been designed with this very purpose in mind, cutting the squib lines one by one in a series of savage slices. When at last he was free, he debated whether to bring his seatpack with its emergency gear, or leave it with the chute. It contained water and food, medicine and dressings, flares, tools, ammunition, and most important of all, a backup emergency radio. "Two bits says the one in my survival vest got creamed when I hit the ground," he opined just above the sound of his heaving breath. He had just decided to pick through it, when the matter was taken out of his hands. One of the groups was returning, tracking right for him. He had less than a minute's head start. Dropping everything, he took off at a run, but even before he had gone fifty steps, a shot rang out. He threw himself face down into the brush, thorns and vines tearing at his face. There were three more rapid shots followed by a chorus of shouts, and he knew that they had discovered the chute.

The underbrush grew steadily heavier the farther he ran, and several times he got hung up, forcing him to retreat a few steps to find another route. Then he was on a trail, and without thinking, he clung to it, seeking to put as much distance between himself and the searchers as rapidly as possible. Any concept of time and distance and direction had long since vanished as he plunged along in a mindless rush. The jungle was a continuum of trip vines and vicious snags. His flightsuit was tattered and his face and arms felt as if they had been scourged. So consumed was he in his desire to clear the area, that he raced by several stilted houses and was already to the center of the village before the realization struck him. He had just a moment to marvel at his

stupidity before all hell broke loose. Dogs were barking and snapping at his heels. There were calls and shouts and gunshots, and he was conscious of people taking to the path in pursuit.

Propelled by a blind terror he ran for his life, until one by one the dogs dropped off and at last he was in the clear. Get off the trail, dummy, his inner voice counseled, and Gordon veered back into the undergrowth where again he became snared in brambles. "Slow down and get yourself under control," he panted, and for the next fifteen minutes he plowed purposefully through the brush until he came to another trail. Gordon listened carefully for perhaps a minute, but there was no sound save for the distant thunder. For the first time since he took to flight, the thought of direction formed in his mind.

The thunderstorms are over the Assam range, east of Xepon he reasoned, and he tried to focus the area where he was most likely to be. He visualized his last bombing run whose final run-in heading was almost dead west. It was a left rolling pullout, so I was probably heading just about south when the thing came unglued, he continued the reconstruction. If that's the case, I'm several miles south of Route 9, about twenty miles from the border. Then, as he watched the lightning playing on the distant hills, other possibilities began to surface.

If I turn to the right and go toward the mountains, I'll be headed for South Vietnam. If I turn left, I'll be going deeper into Laos. Thoughts came more rapidly now.

South Vietnam is where the base is, but it's also where most of the bad guys are, so maybe I'd be better off going to the left. He almost took off when it struck him that there weren't any friendlies in Laos at all.

When the rescue choppers come looking for me tomorrow. where will they most likely search? He visualized what the helicopter crews would see as they worked above the jungle canopy. Not a hell of a lot, he conceded. It really depends on my survival radio. As before, he listened carefully for nearly a minute, satisfying himself that he was alone before unzipping his survival vest and retrieving the emergency radio which was no larger than a pocket tape recorder. Holding it close to his ear, he thumbed the on volume in search of the carrier signal.

Nothing.

He checked the antenna connection . . it was secure. He switched the set off and then on again . . no change. He thumbwheeled the squelch and volume top to bottom to top again. but it was the same. Maybe the sensitivity is just set too low, but he knew that it wasn't, It had checked out just fine back at the base. Indignation began to rise. but the futility of it all held his anger in check. Thirty percent reliability is probably a little high, I hope that the sonofabitch who manufactured the piece of shit is getting a good night's sleep. But it didn't answer his problem.

He went through the rest of the gear in his survival vest while he vacillated back and forth on which was the smartest course of action. They'll look for me to head for the Assam. he decided, but so will the NVA. Finally it was too much.

"Eenie meenie meinie moe . . ." and off he went at a dog trot to the right -- toward the Assam. He checked his watch and decided to rest every fifteen minutes. It was 0245 - three hours until first light.

After running for less than five minutes, with his mind absorbed in his possibilities for escape once he hit the mountains, Gordon was snatched rudely again into the Present with a chilling sense of deja vu. What is it that I feel? The more he tried to expand his sensitivity to his surroundings, the more he seemed to retreat from the present. Let me be! he seemed to be saying. I don't want to know until it's over. Thus it was that he found himself back in the same village as totally unprepared as before, and, as before, there were the dogs and commotion. Only this time, unlike before, there were people in the street, still excited from the last episode.

Gordon ran out of ideas and emotion at the same time. It was too much to cope with, so he just kept going -- and it almost worked. He passed within five feet of a knot of men -- laborers by their attire -- who were just as shocked by his presence among them as he. To Gordon, it seemed as if he were trapped in a world of wound-down phonograph records with sounds and actions grinding to an inexorable halt. Even the enemy seemed gripped by inertia, so that when they finally gave chase, he had a thirty pace head start.

Something thudded into a tree two feet from his head, and the crack of a rifle shot an instant later confirmed what his senses had already told him. Run, you turkey; If you've never busted your hump before, Do It Now!! Adrenaline coursed through his veins. Though it hardly seemed

possible, his battered and exhausted body heeded the call one more time, and he could actually feel himself lighten as he streaked toward freedom. Then he was airborne, where for one triumphant instant he felt that by his very will he had passed a threshold that had ever before eluded him. His spirit soared like an eagle, but then a searing pain from the back of his leg roared like an express train through his spinal nerve sheathes before slamming white-hot into the core of his consciousness. He was out before he hit the ground, or else he might have heard the shot that felled him.