

Chapter 4

Gordon came awake suddenly and completely. It was still dark, and he strained to find what had brought him to full alert. The silence was total save his breathing. Nameless fears tugged at his ribs. If they're out there, they'll find them and then they'll find me. But there was neither sound nor movement. Nothing. Gordon concentrated harder as if by pure will he could lay back the cloak of darkness, and for the first time he began to make out shapes in the darkness. It was first vestige of dawn, and he realized that his barely perceived awareness of this had been what woke him. Now he could hardly wait to be able to see well enough to extricate himself and clear the area.

Gordon's head was clearer than it had been in days, and as he suffered through the twilight, a plan began to take shape. Oddly, it came together as a sort of dialog between Gordon the body and someone else within his head.

Look Ace, they'll be out looking for this truck by now, and they probably have a pretty good idea where to come.

"I know," he whispered.

We've got to get away from here as soon as possible and head for the mountains.

"Yeah, but what about my leg?"

Look Ace, find a stick and use it like a crutch.

"That's fine for you to say, but first I have to get unpinned."

It'll be light enough to figure it out in a few minutes.

"Roger that."

Gordon's confidence grew that his captors were dead or he would have heard something from them since the bombing, but there was no reason to take chances.

"After I get free, I'll find a good cudgel and we'll see if there's anything worth taking from the truck."

I agree, Ace. You need food and water, otherwise you're no good to either of us.

The dialog made Gordon feel better, so as the light improved, he sought his new companion's help in freeing himself.

Piece of cake, Ace. All you have to do is hollow out the ground beneath your butt and you're home free.

Gordon surveyed the limb and found to his satisfaction that it lay firmly planted on either side of him. For his part, he was in a slight depression which had probably saved him from serious injury or even death. He tried scraping dirt from beneath him with his hands but it was slow work.

You've got to go faster than that, Ace. How about using a stick to break the ground up?

He found a heavy splinter and began hacking at the dirt. It started to crumble away in large chunks and suddenly he was loose enough to wriggle his way out. He felt an enormous sense of accomplishment.

"Now let's see what happened to the gomers."

Staying on the ground because it was safer and easier, Gordon selected a heavy stick, rolled onto his left side to protect the bad leg, and began to crawl toward the battered truck using a slow side-stroke motion.

Come on, guy. You've got to move faster than that.

"This is my act, so screw you. You just stay alert and I'll do my thing." As he paddled along, the thought struck Gordon that he didn't know what to call his new found companion.

Mac.

"Mac?"

Yep. You're Ace and I'm Mac, and don't sweat it. These guys are dead. Trust me.

Gordon reached the near side of the truck and waited. There was no sound coming from the far side so he moved to the hind end and again paused. Peering cautiously around the crushed bed, his eyes first fell on a pair of blood-spattered legs and he felt a sense of relief. Decisively, he moved to the lea side only to be stunned by what he saw. The carnage went far beyond the limits of his recently expanded imagination. Only his knowledge that there had been four soldiers allowed him to fix the origin of such a gruesome landscape. Body parts of every description, some identifiable, others not, littered an area fifty feet on a side. Involuntarily he retreated, the scene etched excruciatingly in his mind's eye. He retched violently, coming close to vomiting. He felt like crying and screaming at the same time, but he didn't.

Look, Ace, they're dog meat. Just remember what they did to you. They had it coming, that's all. It helped and after a bit the nausea subsided.

"You're right about the dog-meat stuff," he levered himself up with his cudgel and hopped his way forward to the cab to check its contents. "It's show and tell time."

The door, bowed and sprung tightly shut, showed no inclination to budge causing Gordon to fear that he might have to try the other side. That thought renewed his resolve and he probed the bowed door with his stick. After resisting several spirited prying attacks, it finally yielded, flying open with a resounding crack.

Shit hot, Ace. Let's get on with it.

The cab was tipped back twenty degrees from level and there was junk tossed around everywhere. Despite the shambles, what he saw immediately was at once heartening and sobering. While there were various pieces of flight gear and equipment strewn about, some of them no doubt his, on top was a bloodstained flight suit bearing the leather ID tag inscribed "Capt. W.E. Firestone, USMCR".

So they got you, you poor sonofabitch. Gordon felt a momentary sadness born of a genuine appreciation for Firestone's ability as an RIO, but those were the breaks. For an instant he had the insight to wonder why this would be the depth of his feelings for a man with whom he shared a common tent and a great number of close calls, but it passed and he got on with business.

Quickly, he tore at the clothing and equipment, knowing that if a search party arrive now, Firestone's fate would most likely be his also. The pockets in the flightsuits and g-suits were empty, as were both survival vests. As he pawed more frantically through the litter, his hope began to fade. Then he found them - two emergency radios, his and Firestone's. They had slipped under the driver's seat almost totally hidden from view.

"Bingo," he rejoiced as he grabbed the first radio and thumbed the volume and sensitivity switches to their maximum positions. Nothing.

"Dear God," he implored, "Please let the other one be good." He flipped it on and it came to life immediately. He was like a child with a telephone wondering whom to call first. He hopped into the clearing on his good leg intending to put out a call for help when it dawned on him that it was a very bad idea.

Come on, Ace, use your head. Let's blow out of here.

"Not before I see if there's anything else worth taking and stuff this junk back in the cab."

The cab rendered up an embarrassment of riches including two canteens of water, rice balls, bamboo shoots, first aid packet, cord, compass, and a signaling mirror. After placing the smaller items in one of the emergency vests and slipping on the canteens, Gordon considered going back to the other side of the truck to get a weapon. However, he found that he wasn't ready to test out his stomach again, and besides, as Mac told him, you're a damned lousy shot, Marine or no Marine.

Despite the pain, Gordon found that since it was so much faster to hop with the aid of a stick than to crawl, there was really no choice. The sun had been up for half an hour, meaning that it was close to seven o'clock. If searchers had started with the sun, they could be here in less than two hours. As it turned out, his cudgel/lever made an excellent crutch. It was too bad that he could find a companion, but he decided to keep his eyes open for one.

No sense being circuitous about this, he reasoned. The best shot is to put as much distance between the truck and us and pray that we don't stumble into a patrol."

During the first half hour, Gordon made pretty good time, estimating that despite the wounded leg, he had covered more than quarter of a mile. In some ways the pain helped keep his mind clear. However, after forty minutes, the pain and weakness began to take their toll and he found it increasingly difficult to maintain his concentration. It wavered, and he fell heavily onto his bad leg, causing him to cry out in pain. He was light-headed and winded when he forced himself to stand and then to move. It was merely a matter of time before he fell a second and then a third time, and then when he tried to arise once more, he collapsed sobbing in utter exhaustion.

The sun was directly overhead when he awoke to the sound of a vehicle close by. He looked carefully but there was no sign of a road in front of him and he was certain he hadn't crossed one since leaving the truck. He checked all around to make sure that he was well concealed.

He should pass in front of us somewhere. Then we'll have an idea where the road is.

But it didn't. The truck veered off, the sound disappearing behind them, leaving little doubt that the wreck would be found shortly.

Don't worry, Ace, with all those body parts to police up, it'll be a week before they realize we're missing. But he did worry.

What worried him also was how little warning the truck gave - it was there and gone in the space of forty seconds. There was a lesson involved: the same conditions that hid him from the enemy, covered their presence as well.

You've had enough rest. It's time to get humping again.

"Don't you think it would be safer to move at night?" Gordon dreaded the pain in his leg that was even now throbbing away rhythmically.

It would be except you'd break your ass for sure hopping around without seeing where you're going. Gordon nodded gathering his resolve. Using an overhanging vine for support, he pulled himself erect, checked his bearings, and headed off.

Remembering what had happened during the morning, Gordon slowed his pace considerably. The approach became a routine of look, plant, hop, listen. Each six second cycle would move him three feet - 30 feet per minute - or about half the previous rate. After what he judged to be an hour he was still able to concentrate, but he felt tired and decided to take a fifteen minute break.

If you keep up this pace, we should hit the mountains in time for your retirement, Ace, but Ace didn't mind. Actually, he was pleased with himself and happy to have someone to talk with after weeks of silence with The Face and The Hand. It was a deception, he knew, but it bolstered his spirits and kept his mind off the pain.

"How far do you figure well have to go until it's safe to call for rescue?"

I don't know for sure, but I would guess around ten miles. That should put us in the hills and away from roads.

"We'll do that by the day after tomorrow or the day after at the outside." Gordon lay back, visualizing the trek in episodes. It was best make goals real or you might not achieve them he'd been told as a boy. High above, unseen because of the jungle canopy, the ripping sound of a westbound jet cut through the lazy afternoon heat. "Outbound with a belly full of nasties, I'll bet. Some gomer's in for a headache." Gordon took a fifteen minute nap.

Fifteen minutes into the next episode they came to a road. Even with his look, plant, hop, listen cycle, he almost didn't see it. Part of the problem lay in the fact that the overhead canopy was intact. Only the undergrowth was hacked back. Backing slightly, he listened carefully for a full minute. Then lying down, he crawled to the edge and looked in both directions noting that the road vanished in less than a hundred yards in either direction. It was a good crossing spot. Again standing, he listened until satisfied that nothing was close by then launched himself across in a series of rapid jumps. He estimated that he cleared the 12 foot roadway in as many seconds.

In the remaining three travelling sessions for the day, they crossed a second road and forded a stream. Gordon filled the canteens even though the water flow was sluggish and pushed on. During the last push, two significant things happened. Gordon chanced upon another crutch shaped stick so similar to the first that he was able to use the two as crutches, allowing him to nearly double his speed. This was offset by a thickening of the undergrowth, and this, together with the fast fading light brought a halt for the day after a half hour. It was time to stop in any event, because Gordon was again becoming lightheaded from exhaustion which no nap would overcome.

I'd guess we've come a mile and a half for the day's activity. You've done really well for your first day out of bed. Gordon was still panting, and though he ached all over the pain in his leg had eased in the fifteen minutes since stopping. Fifteen minutes later, with sleep tugging at him, Gordon decided to eat one of the rice balls rather than save it for later. Despite its bitterness, Gordon had to fight the temptation to bolt the food down, opting instead to eat it virtually kernel by kernel.

"You know what, Mac," he asked lazily as he allowed himself to drift off to sleep. "When we get rescued, I'll have to toss your ass out in the cold."